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THE PARABLES OF
OUR LORD



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THE PARABLES OF OUR LORD

By

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'THE WONDERFUL LIFE OF CHRIST'

'HALF BROTHERS' ETC. ETC.

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I

Introductory

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Introductory

BEFORE beginning to learn anything about the parables of our Lord, it would be well to find out as clearly as we can what a parable is, and how it differs from a fable or an allegory.

What then is a parable?

It is, in the first place, a short story, with only a few incidents in it, or it may be no story at all, only the narration of one circumstance, such as a woman taking leaven, and putting it into some meal, or a man sowing a grain of mustard seed. But it is always a story in which things that are not seen are compared with things that are seen. Our inner and spiritual life is made plainer to us by using the facts of our outer and earthly life to explain it. The parable is not literally true, but it is the reflection of the truth. Just as when we are looking down into a pool of clear and limpid water we see the trees and the hedges growing round it, and the clouds that are floating across the sky overhead, these forms we see are not the real trees and hedges and clouds; but we know they must be above us, and around us, or they could not be reflected in the pool. So the realities of the spiritual life are reflected in the

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parable, which speaks only of this temporal life ; and it would not be possible for any of us to learn much heavenly truth, except through seeing its likeness to some earthly fact with which we are familiar. Thus when we speak of God as our Father, we should not know what that meant, if we did not compare Him with our idea of a good earthly father, who toils and cares for his children, and loves them dearly ; looking at such a father, we say God is like him, only infinitely wiser, stronger, and more loving. Heaven is our home ; but that would say nothing to us if we could not think of some peaceful and pleasant home, where those live who love us—a place that no other place is like ; and we think of heaven as being infinitely safer and happier, where those who love us will live with us for ever. It is in this way we take earthly things to make us understand in some measure heavenly realities.

A parable is, then, a short story containing a few often commonplace incidents, in which are reflected important and eternal truths. Most of our Lord's parables begin with the words, 'The kingdom of heaven is like unto,' and then follows the story.

But how is a parable different from 'a fable' ? Anyone who has read Æsop's Fables, or any other collection of real fables, will see the difference at once. In a fable you will find that the actors and speakers are usually the lower animals, or even things without life, such as trees and

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rocks, or manufactured articles: the country mouse visits the city mouse; the earthen pot speaks to the brass pot; the reed and the oak talk together. Even when the fable is about human beings, we shall find that there is no attempt to teach any spiritual truth in it. It generally conveys some moral, or perhaps crafty lesson, which will help us to get on in this world, and which would be quite as useful if there was no other world than this. A fable is full of worldly wisdom; a parable is full of heavenly wisdom.¹

There are no fables in the New Testament; but there are two in the Old Testament. In Judg. ix. 7-15, we find the fable of the trees desiring to have a king to reign over them; the olive-tree, the fig-tree, and the vine refuse to become king, but the bramble accepts the office, and calls upon all the trees to come and put their trust in its shadow. The author of this fable is Jotham, who ridicules the men of Shechem for their folly in choosing Abimelech for their king; he does not intend to teach them any spiritual lesson.

There is another fable in 2 Kings xiv. 9. 'The thistle that was in Lebanon sent to the cedar that was in Lebanon, saying, "Give thy daughter to my son to wife"; and there passed by a wild beast that was in Lebanon, and trod

¹ The most complete and the longest fable in literature is the German story of 'Reynard the Fox.'

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down the thistle.' Here again, Jehoash, who speaks the fable, speaks it only as an insult to his enemy, Amaziah. In a fable we may have insult, ridicule, derision, cunning, worldly wisdom of every kind, as its moral; but never in a parable. A parable is the likeness between things eternal and things temporal, and it is always intended to teach and train our spirits.

An allegory differs from a parable chiefly because it is a much longer story, and deals with many more incidents and characters. The finest and most complete allegory in the world is the Pilgrim's Progress, which leads us through a long series of events; many of which might be taken as separate parables, such as the passage of Christian through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Yet, more than this, an allegory is not a simple comparing of things spiritual with things temporal. Our Lord uses short allegorical sayings when He says, 'I am the true vine,' and 'I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.' We feel that it would make a great difference if He said only, 'I am like the true vine,' or 'I am like a good shepherd.' There is something more than a mere likeness; something deeper than a similarity. These words of His, and those that follow them, do not form a parable; they begin an allegory, and might be, and have often been, carried out to a great length, and into minute circumstances, forming beautiful and instructive allegories. Especially have the

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many incidents which might befall a shepherd with his flock, been used as setting forth the relationship between Jesus Christ and His disciples. These allegorical sayings, which show the actual relationship, not the mere likeness, between our Lord and those who believe in Him, are to be found frequently in the epistles of the New Testament, which contain no parables.

But why did the Lord teach so much by parables? Why did He not speak like the old prophets, or like the wise men among the heathen? First of all, we must remember that we have only a very few of the lessons He must have taught to His disciples. During the three years He was with them He must have taught them innumerable lessons, of which we have no record: for there was no one to write them down at the time. So we have only got such words as, by the work of the Holy Spirit, remained most clearly, and most deeply, in the memories of His disciples. And what kind of teaching is most easily remembered by ordinary people? That which is conveyed by means of a story. The story takes hold of the imagination, and the imagination ponders over it, until it is imprinted on the memory. It may be a long time before the understanding finds out its true meaning; and the memory keeps it like a treasure till the moment comes for understanding it.

The people our Lord taught were the common people, who heard Him gladly; but they would not have heard Him gladly if He had spoken to

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them as though they had been learned scribes and priests. He spoke to them in a way which would interest them, and which would be easily repeated, and remembered among them. When He wished to teach them to forgive one another, He not only bade them pray, 'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive them that sin against us'; but He told them the story of a king who forgave his servant a great debt freely; but how this servant threw a fellow-servant into prison, till he should pay a small debt to himself. When Jesus tried to press home to their hearts the great commandment, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself,' He spoke the parable of the Good Samaritan. We can imagine how the common people, going home to their farms and their vineyards, and their houses, where their families and servants lived, those who could not hear Jesus for themselves, would repeat these parables to them, as they could not have repeated some long sermon. 'Tell us one of the parables of Jesus,' would often be said to those who had listened to Him.

Perhaps one thing our Lord wished to teach us is that all our life, with its common, daily events, is but a parable; a likeness of the other world; and in how many ways those unseen things can be compared with the things we see. There are three lines of Milton's which express this—

'What if earth
Be but the shadow of heaven, and things therein
Each to other like, more than on earth is thought!'

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We close our eyelids at night, and sight goes from us, and hearing, and the consciousness of all that is happening in the great earth on which we live: and we call it sleep, because we awake again to familiar sights and sounds; but is it not the symbol of death, which will make us blind and deaf, and unconscious of all that interests us here? And when we awake in the morning, refreshed and glad, and strong for work again, all our weariness gone, it is but the symbol of our rising again from the sleep of death, refreshed and glad, and strong for other work in other worlds. When food strengthens us, and gives us vigour for our appointed toil, does not that set forth the strengthening of the soul that feeds on the thought of Christ's life and death, and so makes Him to be to us the Bread of Life? We are scholars in a school; so are we scholars in Christ's school. We are brothers one to another; and we are all brothers to Christ. The kingdom of God is full of likenesses to our life here on earth.

The one truth in all the parables of our Lord is that the kingdom of heaven is shadowed forth by everything in this world that is good, and pure, and true. Not a single day can pass over us without bringing to us the likeness of heavenly things; if we were only wise enough to see them.

'I need Thee,' prays one of the great souls of the last century, 'to teach me day by day, according to each day's opportunities and needs. Give

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me, O Lord, that purity of conscience, which alone can receive, which alone can improve Thy inspirations. My ears are dull, so that I cannot hear Thy voice. My eyes are dim, so that I cannot see Thy tokens. Thou alone canst quicken my hearing, and purge my sight, and cleanse and renew my heart. Teach me to sit at Thy feet, and to hear Thy word. Amen.'

II

The Sower

I I

Matt. xiii. 2-23; Mark iv. 1-20; Luke viii. 4-15

'And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore. And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow; And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up: Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them: But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear. And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing, see not; and hearing, they hear not; neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.

'Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower. When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side. But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended. He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful. But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.'—MATT. xiii. 2-23.

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ONE of the first parables spoken by our Lord is also one of the most familiar, and is so much more easily understood because our Lord Himself gave the interpretation of it to His disciples: it is called the Parable of the Sower. We find it in the three first Gospels; and here let us notice that there are no parables given in the Gospel according to St. John. There are a few allegorical sayings, such as 'I am the true vine,' and 'I am the good shepherd'; but there is no real parable.

On the day that Jesus Christ spoke the Parable of the Sower, He had been vehemently rebuking the scribes and Pharisees, who wanted Him to show them a sign from heaven, which He refused to do. We must always remember that the Pharisees were considered the most religious persons of that time; and that the scribes were the men whose whole business was to write out and study the books in the Old Testament. They ought themselves to have been sowers of good seed, teaching the people the truths of the Old Testament and so preparing their hearts to receive the words of Jesus Christ. Instead of

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this they were always setting themselves against Him, and striving to make Him say or do some wrong or foolish thing. At this time He seems to have grown weary of talking with them, and He left them and went out of the house, down to the shore of the lake, and sat down there to rest Himself, and to find that calm and peace which His strife with the quarrelsome Pharisees had troubled.

But the people who had been listening to Him in the house followed Him, and as they passed through the streets of Capernaum, others joined them, eager to hear and see what was likely to happen. For Jesus had spoken very severely to the Pharisees, and some of them no doubt wished to hear Him upbraid them again—it is a common thing for people to take pleasure in hearing others blamed. A great multitude, therefore, soon gathered about Jesus, as He sat resting on the shore. Seeing how thick the crowd was, and how they thronged Him, so that only a few could see and hear Him, Jesus got into a boat, and had it pushed a little way from the shore, so that He could be seen and heard by the multitude. And now, what is Jesus Christ going to say?

All the country round the lake was very beautiful. The soil was very fruitful, and there were oliveyards and vineyards, and orange and date trees growing in rich abundance. The city of Capernaum was the largest place on the lake,

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but all along the shores lay little hamlets and farmhouses dotted here and there among the oliveyards and vineyards. So clear the air was, and so bright the sunshine, that distant objects could be seen quite plainly. The fishermen letting down their nets or drawing them in and out of the sparkling waters, the vine-dressers at work among the spreading vines, the labourers digging in the fields, the boats of merchandise setting sail from the city wharf, the women grinding corn at their doors for the bread they were about to bake; all these things could be seen by the crowd and by Jesus Christ.

Possibly it was in the early spring, and there may have been within sight some husbandmen at work sowing their seed broadcast. To sow broadcast is to take the seed up by handfuls, and throw it against the wind, which scatters it hither and thither. The good seed falls at once upon the soil which has been broken up and ploughed for it; but the lighter seed is carried farther away by the wind, and falls upon the hard-trodden footpath, and the neglected corners where thorns grow, and upon the rocky ground, on which the plough can make no furrows.

'Behold!' said Jesus Christ, to the crowd listening eagerly for Him to speak, 'the sower went forth to sow; and as he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the birds came and devoured them: and others fell upon the rocky places, where they had not much earth: and straightway

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they sprang up, because they had no deepness of earth: and when the sun was risen, they were scorched: and because they had no root, they withered away. And others fell upon the thorns; and the thorns grew up, and choked them: and others fell upon the good ground, and yielded fruit, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear' (Matt. xiii. 3-9, R.V.).

I think the multitude must have been disappointed. They were used to parables, and this seemed a very simple one. Jesus had not taught them in this way before; He had spoken things much more difficult to understand. Even His disciples were surprised, and came to ask Him why He did it. What could He mean, also, by saying 'He that hath ears to hear, let him hear'? Were not all these people hearing Him? Had they followed Him for any other purpose? But Jesus knew that only a few of those who were in the crowd were really listening to Him with a wish to learn. For more than a year He had been living in their towns and villages, teaching them about the kingdom of God; He had been doing mighty works among them; He had gone about doing good: yet they did not seem to learn, or understand, or remember. They might have heard, and seen, and understood; but they did not. So now He would speak to them in parables, which would sink into the memories of some of them, and after lying there

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perhaps many years, as the seed lies for months in the ground, the husk would decay, and the truth Jesus wished to teach would spring up in their hearts.

‘Why speakest Thou unto them in parables?’ asked the disciples. ‘Because,’ said Jesus, ‘seeing, they see not; and hearing, they hear not; neither do they understand.’ When they understand, they will be converted, and God will heal them.

But the Lord explained the parable to His disciples.

The sower is the Lord Himself, come forth from His Father’s house to sow the seed. The seeds are the truths He teaches; the field is the world; the ground on which the truth falls is the hearts of men; the multitude to whom He had just spoken represented all the classes who in after times should hear His word.

The first class were those who turned a deaf ear to Him, and closed their eyes to His mighty works, and hardened their hearts against Him. They were like the trodden-down pathway, made so hard by constantly passing footsteps that not even a blade of grass could spring up; when the words of Jesus Christ fell upon their ears, they could penetrate no farther into their nature, and evil thoughts at once devoured them up. It was impossible to them to understand that the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peace-makers, were the

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only ones blessed by God. They thought the rich, and the powerful, and the learned were God's favourites, and they did not believe Jesus that it was not so. They could not comprehend that Jesus was able to deliver them from their sins as He was able to cast out devils from the possessed. They were too hardened and too dull to know they were sinners. They had not chosen to hear, so now they were deaf; they had not chosen to see, so their eyes were blinded; they had not chosen to understand, and their hearts had grown stupid and foolish. They might live and prosper in this world, be rich, and powerful, and learned; but they could not enter the kingdom of heaven. 'When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the evil one, and snatcheth away that which hath been sown in his heart.'

Are we ourselves trying to hear what God says, and to see what He does, and to understand both His words and His works? Are we letting the evil that is within us so harden our hearts against what is good and true, that every day it becomes more difficult to understand truth and goodness? Every wrong thought, and word, and action, is like a heavy footstep treading down the desire to be good, and in time our hearts will grow as hard as the stones on which we walk.

Jesus knew that His words had fallen, like the

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seeds in the clefts of the rocks, into the hearts of some of the people; and just as the seed grew up quickly, so they had been at once full of joy and eager to become His followers. They were glad to enter into the kingdom of heaven if it was all sunshine and glory and happiness; they were quite willing to sit down with Him on His throne, and ready to help Him to judge His enemies. But now His enemies were growing many, and the scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem were persecuting Him; and it was plain that the kingdom of heaven meant something else than joy and triumph. The hot sun of persecution which was beating on His head scorched them up, and the tribulation we all need to thresh away the chaff in us was too bitter for them: they went away, and walked no more with Him. Is it so with any of us? The words of Christ must take a deep root in our souls before we can bear temptation and sorrow. It is no easy thing to enter into the kingdom of heaven; we can only take possession of it by doing violence to our sinful and selfish natures. We must suffer as Christ suffered, and fight as He fought, before we can reign with Him.

The third class of our Lord's listeners were those who had received His words into hearts full of thorns. Some were filled with cares of many kinds, which they would not cast away—quite natural anxieties about their households,

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their children, and the future, which loomed darkly before them. They had not learned the lesson which Christ pressed upon them, 'Take no thought for the morrow. Sufficient unto the day is the *evil* thereof.' Others were deceived by their riches and possessions, and they desired the things of this world more than the kingdom of heaven. It is true some of the lighter seed had fallen into these hearts, and grew up somehow; but the thorns choked them, and the good seed could not grow at all. The outer forms of religion, and the easier precepts of Christ, found a place in their lives; but there was no real fruit, for the thorns flourished most, and exhausted all that was strong in their hearts. Like the scribes and Pharisees, who paid tithe on mint, anise, and cummin, but who neglected judgment, and mercy, and truth, these hearers were ready for the small duties of God's house; but had not time or strength for doing the weighty and the real service.

One of our Lord's own chosen disciples belonged to this class. He heard all His teaching, and to him Jesus showed the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven; yet Judas was so deceived by the love of riches, and the cares of this life, that not one seed could grow up in his heart unchoked. He could wait upon Jesus Christ, and follow Him month after month; but he never had an honest and true heart, which could hear His

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word and hold it fast, and bring forth fruit with patience.

Of the three classes of hearers, the first rejected Christ, the second forsook Him, the third betrayed Him. Let us pray to God to keep us from belonging to any of them.

But there were other hearers, whose hearts were like the rich soil turned up by the plough, and ready for the good seed to fall into its furrows. Even here there was some difference. The seed was the same, but the fruit varied; some was thirty, some sixty, some a hundredfold, according to the conditions which surrounded it. So the truths taught by Christ produce smaller or greater results, according to our own acceptance of them. If we take them deep down into our hearts, pondering over them, and doing our utmost to understand them, then we shall bring forth more fruit than if we give less thought and less love to them.

I have spoken as if there was lighter seed in distinction to good seed. Let me give you some clue to the meaning of this. The lighter seed are those precepts about our outer conduct, such as in the Sermon on the Mount, about fasting, saying prayers, avenging ourselves, laying up treasure, being careful for the morrow, and such like; all of which are good, and some easy to observe. But the good seed, which must sink very deeply into our hearts before they can bring forth fruit, are the profounder truths, such as the love of God,

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the salvation of the soul from sin by Jesus Christ, the necessity of self-sacrifice, and others, which we must all seek out and learn for ourselves. These are the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, which it is given unto His disciples to know.

III

The Tares and the Wheat

Matt. xiii. 24-30, 37-43

' Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.

' He answered and said unto them, He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man; The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.'

The Tares and the Wheat

THE Parable of the Tares and the Wheat appears to have been spoken by our Lord immediately after the Parable of the Sower—in the same place, and to the same listening people. It is recorded only in the Gospel according to St. Matthew. In that according to St. Mark (iv. 26–29) we find a short parable which has some similarity to it, and which occurs in the same connection with the Parable of the Sower, but it is essentially different from the Parable of the Tares.

The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away. But when the blade sprang up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. And the servants of the householder came, and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? whence then hath it tares? And he said unto them, An enemy hath done this. And the servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he saith, Nay, lest haply while ye gather up the tares, ye root up the wheat also with them.

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Let both grow together until the harvest ; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather up first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them ; but gather the wheat into my barn.

It would seem as if our Lord privately explained all His parables to His disciples (see Mark iv. 34), but His interpretation of two only has been recorded for us ; this parable, and that of the Sower. As in the former parable, he that soweth the good seed is Himself, the Son of Man ; the field is the world. The good seed are the sons of the kingdom ; the tares are the sons of the evil one. The enemy is the devil ; the harvest is the end of the world ; and the reapers are the angels. It is this interpretation we are about to consider.

Our Lord is the author and giver of all that is good—not in one land, or in many lands, but throughout all the world ; He has no smaller field in which He sows His good seed. In every country, every nation, and every age, all that has been good has been His work, who is at once the Son of God and the Son of Man. He is 'the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.' There is not one soul that comes into the world which has not at one time or another a wish to be good and happy—to be otherwise than wicked and miserable. There is a discontent with sin, which comes from heaven, and is the good seed which Jesus Christ, by His

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Spirit, sows in our hearts. To be friends with God, to feel that He is indeed our Father—that is what we all, more or less, long for, some of us with a deep, unutterable longing. Jesus Christ sows these seeds in our hearts, and if they grow unchecked, they will spring up into eternal life. Christ could not be satisfied if any soul of man was left with no seed of eternal life implanted in it. The world is His field.

‘The good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom’ (Matt. xiii. 38, R.V.), He says, in His interpretation of the parable. These are they who, as in the Parable of the Sower, receive His words into honest and good hearts, and understand it, and bring forth fruit with patience. In all nations, and in all ages, there are those who believe in God, and diligently seek Him. Peter, who was one of our Lord’s closest followers, and who heard far more of His teaching than has been recorded for us, says, ‘Of a truth God is no respecter of persons : but in every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him’ (Acts x. 34). The kingdom of heaven is wider and greater than the world, and the sons of the kingdom* may be found even in the darkest corners of the earth.

The tares are the sons of the wicked one. There is a tall weed growing in our hedgerows and fields called dandelion, which springs up with a long stalk, and an ear formed at the end of it

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resembling corn so closely that it can only be distinguished from it, in its earlier stages of growth, by a trained and practised eye. By the time the difference is seen, its roots are intertwined with those of the corn, and it is then impossible to weed it out. The seeds of the darnel, if they get ground into meal, are nauseous and harmful, and even poisonous if there is much of it. Shakespeare knew its nauseous quality—

‘Want ye corn for bread?

’Twas full of darnel; do you like the taste?’

The author of *The Land and the Book* says: ‘Where the grain has headed out, the tares have done the same, and then a child cannot mistake them for wheat or barley; but where both are less developed, the closest scrutiny will often fail to detect them. I cannot do it at all with any confidence. Even the farmers do not attempt to separate them. They would not only mistake good grain for them, but very commonly the roots of the two are so intertwined that it is impossible to separate them.’

Exactly as the tares and the wheat grow together in a cornfield—so intertwined that it is impossible to separate them—so do the children of God live everywhere intermingled with the children of this world. They have the same relationships to fill, the same work to do. In a great measure they must live the same kind of life. Every attempt that has been made to

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separate the followers of Christ from the outer world has resulted in failure.

Sometimes the attempt has been made to form a small, select circle, 'a little spot of heavenly ground,' where none should be admitted who were not true and simple Christians; but immediately the tares spring up, and before long there must be a fresh weeding-out, and a smaller circle made. At other times the weeding-out is tried on a large scale, and persecution arises as a means of clearing Christ's kingdom from offences; and lo! the ground of the persecutors is itself filled with tares, and amongst the persecuted, good corn is plucked up with the weeds.

It is not granted to Christ's servants to distinguish the darnel from the wheat until it brings forth its fruit; only His eye can discern the difference from the beginning. When we say to Him, 'Wilt Thou then that we go and gather them up?' He answers, 'Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest' (Matt. xiii. 28-30).

The enemy is the devil. This word devil means 'one who sets at variance,' or a slanderer; an enemy who sets friends at variance by telling lies to each of the other. God is the Father of all; but how many men think of Him only as an angry and revengeful Judge! God is always being slandered to us, and we are set at variance against Him; but we cannot be slandered to

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Him, or He set against us, because He is perfect wisdom and perfect love. Yet there is no question as to the eternal enmity that exists between good and evil, righteousness and iniquity. There is no doubt, also, that we must belong to one kingdom or the other; we cannot be children of light and children of darkness. 3430

The poisonous seed sown by the enemy was altogether different from the good seed sown by the owner of the field. Tares and wheat are suffered to grow together until the harvest; but then the separation is made, and the tares are cast into a furnace of fire, by which means only is their power to do mischief, by shedding more seed, effectually destroyed. The wicked may be suffered to do evil in this world, but there shall be no more such liberty for sin in the world to come.

The harvest is the end of the world, or the 'consummation of the age,' as the new version of the Bible puts it, in the margin. What is this consummation of the age? We do not know. The disciples expected it in their time, and were made strong and glad by the hope of it. Through all the centuries since, the people of God have been longing for it. Foolish and false predictions are constantly being made of it. But one thing is true and certain: the end of the world comes to each one of us separately when we die. There is one sure, inevitable harvest. Death, the stern, strong angel of God, puts in his sickle every day

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into the field of the earth, and gathers out of it all things that offend, and them that do iniquity, and the righteous also. In the day of harvest even a child can see the difference between tares and wheat; and at the hour of death no mistake will be possible. 'Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name? and in Thy name have cast out devils? and in Thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from Me, ye that work iniquity' (Matt. vii. 22, 23).

But cannot we make a more personal application of this parable? Each of us is a little world, containing all possibilities of good and evil. Christ is sowing good seed in our hearts, which may bring forth fruit a hundredfold. But while we sleep, and are not on the watch, an enemy is sowing tares, which will bear fruit unto death. Christ says, 'All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them' (Matt. vii. 12)—a seed which would bring to pass such a state of peace and prosperity and happiness as the world has never yet dreamed of. The enemy within us whispers, 'Take care of yourself'—that seed from which has sprung all the misery and poverty and drunkenness we see amongst us at this time. Christ says, 'When thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth' (Matt. vi. 3). The enemy brings us public subscription-lists, and tempts us

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to give because our neighbour gives, or as much as he gives. Christ says, 'When ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think they shall be heard for their much speaking' (Matt vi. 7). The enemy teaches us that God is to be reached by long prayers, or by careless prayers said again and again. Christ says, 'Ye cannot serve God and mammon' (Matt. vi. 24). The enemy hints that we must make the best of both worlds, and especially make sure of this. Good and evil are so intermingled that it is difficult to separate them; and we may so live, whilst following the maxims of this world, that even the servants of God may look upon us as a fellow-servant. God alone sees whether our hearts are bringing forth fruit unto eternal life, or poisonous weeds which tend unto death.

To this parable our Lord adds the solemn charge, 'He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.' There were many persons in the crowd of people gathered about Him whose hearts were so filled with tares that there was no place left for the good seed to grow. These were the Pharisees, whose false zeal for the worship of God was soon to develop a murderous hatred of the Son of God; the scribes, who were constantly studying the letter of God's word, but whose hearts were hardened against its spiritual meaning; the people, listening gladly to Christ's teaching, but ready to forsake Him if He said anything to offend them;

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like Judas, who was following Him through years of trial and danger, only to betray Him at last. To all of these He cried, as if He would arouse them to a sense of their great peril, ' He that hath ears to hear, let him hear ! '

IV

The Mustard Seed

Matt. xiii. 31, 32; Luke xiii. 18, 19

'Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.'—
MATT. xiii. 31, 32.

The Mustard Seed

WE come now to a few short parables which do not contain any sort of story, as so many of the others do, though in each of them there is a hidden meaning, which teaches us what the kingdom of God is like. Where a king reigns he makes laws for his kingdom; and these short parables contain some of God's laws for His kingdom, both in the world and in our own hearts.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed we find in Matt. xiii. 31, 32, placed there as if our Lord spoke it immediately after the Parable of the Tares. But in Luke xiii. 18, 19, it seems as if He had spoken it in one of the synagogues on a Sabbath day, after He had healed a poor woman, who for eighteen years had been bowed together, and could in no wise lift up herself. The ruler of the synagogue was filled with indignation, and reproached the people for coming to be healed on the Sabbath day; whereupon our Lord rebuked him so sharply that he and all the other adversaries were ashamed; and the people rejoiced for all the glorious things that were done by Jesus Christ.

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It is quite likely that our Lord uttered many of His parables more than once, when different people were listening to His teaching ; but both in Matthew and Luke this Parable of the Mustard Seed, and the next Parable of the Leaven, seem to be spoken more to His foes than to His friends. They are a prophecy of how great the kingdom of God would become, though, when He spoke, it was like a grain of mustard seed, and a little lump of leaven.

‘As small as a grain of mustard seed’ was a common proverb among the Jews, and meant that it was so little as to be next to nothing. It was the smallest of all the seeds that men took the trouble to sow ; nothing more trifling was worth their care.

Yet from this tiny, insignificant seed there sprang a herb that sometimes grew as tall as one of the lower kinds of trees ; it became the greatest among all herbs, with branches that could bear the weight of the birds that came to feed on its clusters of seed. Even when growing wild this mustard plant attains the height of ten feet ; but if planted in cultivated ground, such as a garden of herbs, it might be expected to grow into a ‘great tree,’ and shoot forth large branches.

The special point of this similitude to the kingdom of God is the exceeding smallness of the seed, and the greatness of the plant springing from it. Our Lord’s disciples were probably disheartened by the parables they had just heard.

The Mustard Seed

In the Parable of the Sower only a quarter of the good seed sown had brought forth fruit; and in the Parable of the Tares they heard of a cunning and diligent enemy, busily sowing poisonous seeds in the same ground as the good seed. The constant opposition of the scribes and Pharisees to their Master discouraged them; and now He Himself had spoken parables which seemed to damp their hopes. But this parable was full of certain triumph.

One grain of mustard seed a man took—not a handful: one grain which he could hardly see or grasp—and sowed it in his garden; and this tiny, almost invisible, grain sprang up into a ‘great tree.’ In his garden he planted it—not a field which is ploughed, and sown, and then harrowed, and left till the harvest is ripe, but in a garden, where men walk to and fro daily, watching the growth of their herbs and fruits, and guarding them against blight and injury. The kingdom of God was like this.

So when the hour came when our Lord should be crucified, it was like the single grain being sown in the garden of the world. His crucifixion seemed so trivial and insignificant an event that none of the great people of the earth took notice of it; it was similar to the death of thousands upon thousands of other men. But from that single death has sprung the great all-embracing religion of Christianity, which will some day draw every man under the shadow of its branches, where he will

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be safe from all tyranny and evil. In the meanwhile God watches the growth of this kingdom, as a man watches the growth of the plants in his garden.

Our own souls, also, may be likened to the garden of the Lord; each of them may be a 'little spot of heavenly ground.' One seed planted by God's hand there will become a great tree, and will bear fruit, which will satisfy all our hungering and thirsting after righteousness. A tiny seed of patience will grow into great long-suffering; the smallest seed of love will spring up into a far-reaching loving-kindness, which will care for all living beings. Nor shall we finish all our growth here. Through all the endless ages which lie before us, we shall make new discoveries of fresh fruit on the tree of life. 'To him that overcometh,' says our Lord, 'will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God' (Rev. ii. 7).

v

The Leaven

Matt. xiii. 33; Luke xiii. 21

‘ Another parable spake he unto them ; The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.’—MATT. xiii. 33.

The Leaven

VERY similar to the insignificant, commonplace act of a man sowing seed in his garden is the everyday household duty of a woman making bread. Our Lord often saw His mother and her neighbours making bread for their families. He and His family were poor people, and kept no servants. The corn had first to be ground into flour between two large and heavy stones, and only women and slaves were ever employed in this hard work, which was considered too menial for men. But I like to think that He who took upon Himself the form of a bond-servant, or slave, did often share His mother's hard and tedious labours.

When the corn was ground, the flour and water were first mixed together into a thick paste; and then a lump of old dough from the last baking, in a high state of fermentation, was hidden in the midst of it. The flour and water could be baked into unleavened cakes; but when once the leaven had penetrated into the paste, it was absolutely impossible to separate it again. It was a slow process, and the mass of kneaded flour and water,

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with the lump of leaven in the midst, was usually left to work during the night.

The thought of a kingdom of God upon earth was not a new one ; it was common among the Jews from their earliest history. Christ took it, as the woman took the old piece of dough, and hid it in the great unleavened mass of the heathen world. He gave to the world the idea of a kingdom of righteousness, which should be in the heart, not in outer forms of worship : hidden, not seen, until it has so leavened the whole nature that righteousness cannot be separated from it. This process is extremely slow, but it is going on, and there is a desire for a universal reign of righteousness and peace. We are still in the darkness of the night, but the morning must come, when all the world will be the kingdom of God. •

The three measures of meal have by some been referred to the three continents then known to man—Europe, Asia, and Africa, or Libya, over which the Romans had extended their victories. All these countries were heathen, the Jewish nation alone possessing a knowledge of the true God. From that little land of Palestine, where our Lord lived and died, the doctrines of Christianity have spread, and are still spreading, throughout the world. The customs and maxims of every nation are influenced by Christianity ; and in proportion as the power of the Gospel is felt, they become altogether purer, and higher, and better, just as leavened bread is lighter, more

The Leaven

pleasant, and more wholesome than unleavened bread.

But in the three measures of meal we may also see the deeper and more personal meaning of the body, mind, and spirit of man. Christ may hide the leaven of His life and His Spirit in our hearts; and it will work within us until every thought and feeling of our spirits, every thought of our minds, and every action of our bodies, are brought into harmony with the will of God.

'The kingdom of God is within you' (Luke xvii. 21), says our Lord. No outward forms, no mere worship in words, are of any avail; they will not satisfy either God or ourselves. The leaven must be hidden in our inmost natures, and must work through to the outward and visible signs of our characters. Only in this are we different from the mass of unleavened dough into which the woman put the leaven: we may resist having the leaven hidden in our hearts. It is necessary for us to yield ourselves to the influence of God's Holy Spirit.

Many a man who had listened to the Parable of the Mustard Seed would think of it as he walked to and fro in his garden in the cool of evening, wondering what the Teacher meant when He spoke it. Many a poor toil-worn woman, as she kneaded the bread for her household, would remember what the Master had said in her hearing about the leaven hidden in the meal; and though she might not understand its meaning,

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the very thought of Jesus Christ and of the kingdom of God would do her good, and make her work seem lighter.

The kingdom of God was like unto these simple, common, everyday things, and suited to working-people; it was no far-off, great, and splendid kingdom, with which only the learned, and the rich, and the noble had to do.

VI

The Treasure hid in a Field

Matt. xiii. 44

*' Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field ;
the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof
goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field.'*

The Treasure hid in a Field

NO one can be a Christian without striving to be one. We have the kingdom of heaven all around us, for the leaven of Christ's Gospel is so wrought into all the customs and ideas and ordinary life of English people, that very few escape from the influence of it. It would be impossible to separate us from the knowledge of His life and teaching. But we may have eyes, and see not; ears, and hear not; hearts that understand not. We must of our own free will enter into the kingdom of God.

'The kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field' (Matt. xiii. 44).

In Eastern countries it is not an unusual thing for men digging in the ground to come upon some carefully-concealed treasure. In all lands where there are frequent wars, rich people are accustomed to bury a portion of their riches in some place known only to themselves, to secure themselves against the risk of losing all they have in evil days. Where we should put

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our money in the bank, they hide it in the ground. If the person who knows the secret of the hiding-place dies suddenly, perishing, perhaps, in battle, the secret dies with him. When a stranger discovers such a treasure by chance, he is filled with joy, and hides it again, acting with the greatest prudence lest he should lose the benefit of his discovery. If he is a poor man, he is ready to part with all that he has, to buy the spot where the treasure lies.

God has hidden the kingdom of heaven, in this troubled and warlike world of ours, like a treasure made safe and secure against all the chances and changes of evil days. Many of us find this treasure quite unexpectedly, as a man digging in a field might unawares uncover a box of money or jewels. We think nothing of the kingdom of heaven, and are content to go on doing our work or taking our pleasure in this life—making the best of this world, as we say—for a long while. But to each one of us there comes a time when we cannot help but see that there is another life and another world—better, higher, holier than this.

We have caught sight of the treasure hidden in our field. If we are foolish, we shall cover it up again, and go on digging day after day for common things; but if we are wise and prudent, like the man in this parable, we shall, for very joy, part with all else that we have, rather than lose again this priceless treasure.

The Treasure hid in a Field

But must we sell all that we have? All. How foolish the labourer would have been to prefer his little mud hut and poor possessions to the treasure of gold and jewels he found in the field! With them he could furnish himself with a far better dwelling and more endurable riches. We give up our fancied wisdom, our self-righteousness, our vanity, our love of money, our selfishness, in order to secure the peace, and joy, and love which are the true riches of God's kingdom.

The hiding again of the treasure may teach us that it is not wise to make too loud an outcry that we have discovered the kingdom of heaven. We cannot remember too often that our Lord says: 'The kingdom of God cometh not with outward show' (Luke xvii. 20, mar.). Many people may call Him Lord; but if they are workers of iniquity, He will not know them. The true kingdom, which is within, will manifest itself in all our outward acts. The treasure can be found by all; but each of us must find it for ourselves.

For it is absolutely true that no man can discover the treasure hidden away for each one of us. No other eye can see it; no other soul desire it. It is a treasure hid with Christ in God; and He alone can awaken the soul to the joy of its possession. St. Paul found it, for he counted all things but loss that he might win it; and having won it, he cries, 'For I am persuaded,

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that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.'

VII

The Pearl of Great Price

Matt. xiii. 45, 46

'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant-man seeking goodly pearls: Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it.'

The Pearl of Great Price

THIS parable teaches the same lesson as the last—that we must be willing to part with all that we have to make sure of the kingdom of heaven. But in this case the treasure is not found, as it were, by accident, but is sought for diligently.

In Eastern lands men often spend a third of their riches upon precious stones and pearls, which, in evil times, are more easily carried about their persons, and are lighter than large sums of money. There have always been merchants who travel from place to place, everywhere inquiring after goodly stones and pearls; and many of them undergo great privations and perils to secure some special jewels that are in the market. When they find one of great value, they gladly sell all the rest to buy it. These merchants know what they are doing, and are judges of the worth of what they are seeking for.

In every age there have been a few men who have been seeking after God, and who, in seeking after Him, have found many truths, which have been like goodly pearls. Every truth is like a

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pearl; but alone, and in itself, it is not perfectly round and smooth and clear, as a pearl ought to be. Only Christ Himself, who is the Truth, can be called the 'One Pearl of Great Price.' There is but one such pearl, but each one of us may find it.

Some of us—many, we hope—are seeking diligently after good things. We are trying to be true and honest, brave and manly, gentle and kindhearted, to love our fellow-men, and to do good to all with whom we are brought into contact; or we are striving after learning, and culture, and wisdom: we are not content with a low life.

All these are goodly pearls; and if we find the kingdom of heaven whilst seeking after them, we shall discover that it is not a different thing, but a better, more precious, and more enduring thing of the same kind. If we seem to part with them for a moment, it is to have them all back again in one pearl, perfect and absolutely faultless. They, in themselves, were somewhat rough, or deformed, or of a yellowish tinge; and they are smaller, and of less worth, than the one which we are willing to buy at the cost of them all.

There is one other point to think of in this parable. The origin of the pearl is a foreign atom, not belonging to the shell on which it fastens, but really a disease. The substance gathering round and covering the diseased spot

The Pearl of Great Price

forms the pearl, thus changing the flaw itself into an article of great beauty and value.

So it is with our own nature. Sin is foreign to it: a disease and malady that does not belong to it as God made it. But Jesus Christ, who came to destroy sin, has transformed and lifted up human nature into immeasurably more than its original value.

VIII

The Seed Growing Secretly

Mark iv. 26-29

' And he said, So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground ; And should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how. For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself ; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear. But when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come.'

The Seed Growing Secretly

THIS similitude, which is to be found only in the Gospel according to St. Mark, is placed in the same connection with the Parable of the Sower as that of the Tares and Wheat, which is to be found only in the Gospel according to St. Matthew. It is necessary to remember that no record of our Lord's words or works was made during His lifetime. We have only such portions of His teaching as were most deeply impressed on the minds and memories of the disciples whom Christ Himself taught, and those who were taught by them.

The similitude of the seed growing secretly is not altogether a parable, because there is no story in it, no events, no actors. It is rather a simple analogy, drawn between a spiritual truth and a natural and universal proceeding. Probably the first step in agriculture taken by mankind is the sowing of seed. Even among savage tribes a man will cast seed into the ground, and go away, sleep, and rise night and day, and come back to his field only when the harvest is ripe, not knowing how the earth has brought forth fruit of herself.

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The pith of this short parable seems to be the silence, and secrecy, and spontaneousness with which the kingdom of God is even now growing in the world. The true kingdom needs no outward show, no pomp, no thrones and crowns. 'The kingdom of God cometh not with observation,' our Lord says elsewhere: 'Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you' (Luke xvii. 20, 21). There in our hearts, which no man sees or knows, except ourselves and God, the kingdom of God is growing or dying. Neither outward worship, nor beautiful ceremonies, nor splendid buildings, not long forms of prayers, or keeping special days, or belonging to any church, proves that we belong to the kingdom of God. Christ's word alone, growing secretly and silently within us, can help us to realise the truth of St. Paul's saying: 'The kingdom of God is righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost' (Rom. xiv. 17).

IX

The Draw-net

Matt. xiii. 47-50

' Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind : Which, when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away. So shall it be at the end of the world : the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just. And shall cast them into the furnace of fire : there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.'

The Draw-net

THIS is the last of seven parables which Jesus Christ appears to have spoken when sitting in a boat on the Lake of Galilee and teaching the multitude, as they stood upon the shore. The lake abounds with fish, and no sight was more common than that of a band of fishermen at work together with a large draw-net; some rowing the boats, some casting the net, and others, on the shore, dragging it in and seizing the fish, which, by this method of catching them, were of all kinds, both good and bad.

The kingdom of heaven is like that net, said our Lord. The sea into which it is cast is the world, and the fishers are all those who try to gather their fellow-men into the kingdom of heaven, and so to rescue them from their sins and miseries. It required the united efforts of many men to cast the net and draw it to shore, and partnerships were entered into among the fishermen, as between Simon Peter and John and James, who were his partners, and owned their nets and boats in common. So, in the kingdom of heaven, those who would help their fellow-men must act in union with others, and all, with one

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purpose in view, must each do the part allotted to him.

As in the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven, this parable is not yet fulfilled. The net is still in the sea; it will not be filled until all the world is gathered into its meshes. There is a similarity, however, between this parable and that of the tares growing among the wheat, where the good and the evil are inextricably mixed. As the tares could not be separated from the wheat before the time of harvest, so the fishermen could not prevent bad fish from getting into the net, and staying in it until it was drawn to shore.

So, in the kingdom of heaven, as long as it is upon earth, there will be persons who call Jesus Christ their Lord, and teach in His name, and seem to be His disciples, but who are not His true people. It is impossible for us to separate them; we are not wise enough or good enough to judge with certainty between the good and the evil.

These two lessons we ought to learn: to act with others who are seeking to spread the kingdom upon earth; and to refrain from harshly judging those who differ from us. How are we to tell for certain that they are wrong?

Even at the last, when the net is drawn to shore, the fishermen will not be trusted to separate the good from the bad. God will send others of His servants, wiser, stronger, clearer-sighted than

The Draw-net

we are; the angels will come forth from their heavenly home to gather the good together, and sever the wicked from among the righteous. And as the fishermen are said to sit down to make the separation of the good from the bad, so will the last judgment be made deliberately and carefully; there will be no danger of any mistake through hurry or confusion. 'For the Son of Man shall come in the glory of His Father, with His angels; and then He shall reward every man according to his works' (Matt. xvi. 27). *Every man*; each one judged by himself.

To this parable, and only this, our Lord adds the terrible sentence concerning the wicked: 'They shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matt. xiii. 50). This is a doom so terrible that words cannot describe it, any more than they can describe the joys of heaven. No thought of ours can dimly imagine the anguish of those souls who have wilfully sinned against God. Sin always brings some loss and misery here; but, like the fish caught in a net, until it is dragged to the shore we still remain, as it were, in our native element, and cannot enter into the deep misery of being separated from among all that are good. The most depraved would recoil from the thought of always dwelling only with the wicked, hearing no words that were not curses or lies, seeing no action that was not a crime.

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Such a lot is terrible, even in this world ; as it was in convict settlements, which were frequently called 'hells upon earth.' But in another life, with the conscience quickened to a sense of the just anger of God, the doom is so unutterably fearful that our Lord came down from heaven to save the world from it, by tasting Himself the bitterness of death for every man.

It must have been with great heaviness of heart that our Lord uttered these words ; they come at the close of the seven parables in which He teaches the people what the kingdom of heaven is like. In the mixed crowd of friends and foes and careless hearers before Him were some who would go down into that deep gulf of tribulation and anguish from which He was seeking to save them all. These seem to be the last words He spoke to them at that time, and all of them would go away with the solemn warning in their ears : 'The angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire : there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matt. xiii. 49, 50).

X

The Unmerciful Servant

Matt. xviii. 21-35

‘ Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.

‘ Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt. But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellow-servants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. And his fellow-servant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow-servants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow-servant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.’

The Unmerciful Servant

DURING the last year of His life our Lord led a wandering life, accompanied by His disciples, sometimes seeking to avoid His enemies, and sometimes going from place to place teaching. But He had a short rest at Capernaum, and there His disciples asked Him who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? (Matt. xviii. 1-6). He called a little child to Him, and then proceeded to talk to them of humility and kindness, and warned them against causing others to stumble, or being made to stumble by the offences of others. Then came Peter to Him, saying: 'Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?' (Matt. xviii. 21). To pass over seven sins against himself seemed a great stretch of brotherly love. Jesus did not answer the question, 'Who, then, is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' but this question of Peter's He answered very fully.

'Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants.' At the very outset, when he began to reckon, a servant was brought to him who owed ten thousand talents. This was an

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enormous debt, and probably the servant was one to whom the king had entrusted the government of some province of his kingdom, to receive the revenues of it, and to pay them into the king's treasury. But these revenues were still due, and the servant had to be brought to the reckoning, for he would never have gone of his own accord, with the thought of that enormous debt upon his mind. He had nothing to pay; all the money was spent.

The king, therefore, commanded him to be sold, he, and his wife, and his children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. But he fell down and worshipped him, crying: 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all' (Matt. xviii. 26). It was the cry of despair; for it was impossible for him to pay a sum so immense, unless he hoped to be allowed to hasten back to the territory over which he was ruler, and there, by tyranny and oppression, extort the money from the people. There was no real contrition in his heart for not having paid his debt to the king; and as there was no repentance, there could be no true gratitude for pardon.

Perhaps the king knew beforehand of his servant's great debt, and took this way of bringing him to see and acknowledge it. As soon as he cried for mercy the king had compassion on him and released him, forgiving him the debt. The reckoning, which had occasioned him so much terror, had proved a benefit to him.

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The debt, which was running on, and constantly bringing him into greater liabilities, was all at once settled. He was a free man; no penalty was to follow on his misuse of his lord's money. He went out of the king's presence forgiven, freed from the chain of debt, and restored to favour.

This man went out, and found one of his fellow-servants, who owed him a hundred pence. It was a small debt, so small that a man who had just been forgiven an enormous debt ought hardly to have remembered it. But he laid his hands on him roughly, and took him by the throat, saying: 'Pay me what thou owest.' There was no more doubt that he did owe the hundred pence than that his creditor had owed the ten thousand talents; in a certain sense the man had a right to exact his due, and if he had not been himself forgiven, no one would have expected him to forego his claim. His fellow-servant fell down before him, as he had fallen down before his king, and besought him, in the same words he had himself used—'Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all.' There was no impossibility here; the sum was a small one, and if time was allowed would soon be repaid. But the cruel creditor would not have patience, but went and cast him into prison till he should pay that which was due to him.

Now their fellow-servants, who had seen all that was done, were very sorry, and came and

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told it to their lord. He called his pardoned servant unto him again, and said to him: 'Thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou besoughtest me: shouldest not thou also have had mercy on thy fellow-servant, even as I had mercy on thee?' (Matt. xviii. 32, 33, R.V.). He had shown plainly that he had not contracted that great debt through carelessness about money-matters, or generosity to other men. Neither was he willing to do to others as he wished others to do to him. So the king was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due. This was a greater and more bitter punishment even than being sold into slavery; but he had proved himself a wicked and unmerciful man, and now he must remain in the hands of the tormentors, whose office it was to wring from him the secret of any hidden hoards he might have made of his lord's money, until he had paid the uttermost farthing.

This parable was the answer to Peter's question: 'How oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?' The first lesson seems to me to be how immeasurably greater are our sins against God than our brother's sins against ourselves. Ten thousand talents to a hundred pence! If these were Hebrew talents, the proportion would be as one million and a quarter to one! This computation simply means that there can be no comparison. When, there-

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fore, we seek God's forgiveness for our great debt, we can hardly think of our fellow-men as owing us anything. We feel, however, a certain natural right to resent any wrong done to us, and we may keep this right, and indulge it, on condition that we do not seek God's pardon for ourselves. If the king had not forgiven his servant's debt, it would have been quite lawful for him to exact every penny owing to himself. The spirit of mercy must dwell in the hearts of those who receive mercy.

'How oft shall I forgive?' In Luke xvii. 3, 4 (R.V.), there is another saying of our Lord, laying great stress upon this duty of forgiving much and often. 'Take heed to yourselves: if thy brother sin, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he sin against thee seven times in the day, and seven times turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.' This is a hard saying, and it is no wonder that the apostles, when they heard it, said unto the Lord, 'Increase our faith!' Seven times in the day! But if we need to pray every day, 'Forgive us our trespasses,' then we must take heed that we are ready to grant daily forgiveness. For though we have need of patience, how much greater is God's long-suffering towards us! The mercy that is in the heart of the best of men is as nothing compared with the tender mercies of our Father which is in heaven.

But God forgives us only when we seek for

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pardon; the act of forgiveness is called forth by the act of repentance. We can remit a debt, blotting it out of our account-book, but we cannot forgive a person unless that person wishes it. Those who wrong us will not often wish for our forgiveness, and in a strict sense it is then impossible to pardon them. But we must cherish within us such a spirit of mercy as there is in the heart of God towards all men, even those who are unrepentant. We must long to forgive those who sin against us; and, like the father in the story of the prodigal son, we must see them from afar off when they are returning towards us, and run, and fall on their necks, and kiss them, too ready to pardon to let them have time for begging for forgiveness.

‘For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses’ (Matt. vi. 14, 15).

XI

The Friend at Midnight

Luke xi. 5-8

' And he said unto them, Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves ; For a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him ? And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not : the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed ; I cannot rise and give thee. I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth.'

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THREE times our Lord taught His disciples in parables what prayer is. No form of prayer had been instituted by Moses, amidst all the minute directions given for the offerings and sacrifices. Each worshipper was left to make his own request unto God. Forms of prayer had, however, found their way into the Temple service; and it was the custom of the chief religious leaders to teach a special prayer to their own disciples. John the Baptist had done so; and one of our Lord's disciples, whom we do not know, came to Him when He was Himself praying in a certain place, and said to Him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, even as John also taught his disciples' (Luke xi. 1).

The prayer which Jesus gave to His disciples was extremely short and simple; and He warned them emphatically not to use vain repetitions as the heathen do, who think they shall be heard for their much speaking. 'Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask Him' (Matt. vi. 8), says our Lord. At the same time they were not to be remiss, and listless, or soon discouraged. They might ask, yet not receive in

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a moment ; they might seek without finding for a time ; the door might not fly open at the first knock.

Most of our Lord's disciples were poor men, accustomed to the various inconveniences of small means. Jesus, in His parable, asked them a question, which many of them could answer out of their own experience. Possibly our Lord Himself had met with a similar difficulty when He lived at home in Nazareth ; or He Himself on a journey may have put a friend to the same perplexity.

A traveller comes at midnight to a house where no store of provisions is kept ; he is hungry and weary, having been belated on his journey. The man whose hospitality he claims, is at a loss for something to set before him ; but he has another friend, in whose house there is plenty of bread. It is late, but the case is urgent. He goes to his friend's house, and knocks and knocks again at the door, until he makes himself heard, and his wants known. But the friend is reluctant to get up. ' Trouble me not,' he says : ' the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed ; I cannot rise and give thee ' (Luke xi. 7). But now his friend, is awake, will he have to go away without his wants being supplied ? Though his reluctant neighbour will not rise, and give to him because he is his friend, at last, because of his importunity which is not easily ashamed, he rises, and gives to

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him, not three loaves only, but 'as many as he needeth.'

The meaning of the parable is plain and simple. There was only one point to guard against. The reluctance of the drowsy friend to be troubled has no counterpart in the mind of God towards those who pray. Our Lord, in the verses following the parable, goes on to mark this. Not to one only, but to every man, will God give whatsoever things he needeth. 'Every one that asketh, receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened' (Luke xi. 10). But there must be the real need. A father does not give bread, or a fish, or an egg, to a child who has just come from a good meal, and is not hungry. If the shops had been open there would have been no excuse for troubling his friend, on the part of the man who had nothing to set before the traveller.

God is always ready to give to us good things; but He is the judge of what is good for us. We go to Him, and ask for three loaves, believing that this is all we want; and He supplies to us, not only three, but 'whatsoever things we need,' at the time we need them. We may pray importunately to God, without being ashamed; but we must wait until His own time for the answer.

Yet there is one of God's gifts which we need to possess every day, nay, every hour, of our

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lives; and He does not tarry in bestowing it. Our Lord went on to say, 'If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?'

XII

The Unjust Judge

Luke xviii. 1-8

'And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint ; Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man : And there was a widow in that city ; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary. And he would not for a while : but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man ; Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.' And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith. And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them ? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth ?'

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OUR Lord's second parable on prayer was spoken in order to teach His disciples that 'men ought always to pray, and not to faint.' He had just uttered a prophecy of great tribulation that should come upon the earth; and had said, 'The days will come, when ye shall desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and ye shall not see it' (Luke xvii. 22). He was soon to quit His disciples, and leave them to encounter many troubles and persecutions. Hope would grow faint, and faith would fail and love die, unless they learned to pray, even under the most bitter discouragement—that of praying to God when He seemed not to hear.

'There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, and regarded not man' (Luke xviii. 2). When the judge himself is an impious and a shameless man, where can justice be found? There was absolutely no hope for any person, whatever might be his claims, to get his wrongs set right, unless he was strong enough to force the judge to attend to him, or rich enough to

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• bribe him. He cared neither for God's law nor for man's opinion.

'And there was a widow in that city' (Luke xviii. 3); a woman who had lost her husband and protector, and who was exposed to all kinds of injuries and oppressions. She would often desire to see one of the old happy days again; but she could never see it. An adversary had risen up, who was doing her some great wrong, and there was no one to deliver her from him except the unjust judge. She was too weak to compel him to do her justice, and too poor to pay him for it. What chance was there of getting her suit heard and granted?

There was but one chance, and if this failed she must perish. Day after day she forced herself into the presence of the judge. She lay in wait for him at his gates; she followed him, wailing, along the streets. He could not get her cry out of his ears. She refused to be silenced; if she was driven away, he was sure to see her again in some unexpected quarter. He tried to be deaf and blind to her; but she troubled him with her incessant cry, 'Avenge me of mine adversary!' There was no one else to deliver her from her oppressor; the unjust judge was her only helper.

After a while the utter selfishness of the man gained her cause. 'He said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man; yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge

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her, lest she wear me out by her continual coming' (Luke xviii. 4, 5, R.V.). The constancy and perseverance of her cry had conquered him. If she had fainted in her pursuit, she would have fallen under the power of her adversary.

'Hear what the unjust judge saith,' said our Lord. 'And shall not God avenge His own elect, which cry day and night unto Him, though He bear long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily' (Luke xviii. 6-8). Speedily; for this life, with its long days and nights of crying to God, is but a moment in an endless life. He may seem to be deaf to our prayers, but His answer is already on its way.

In the words following the former parable Jesus compares God with a loving earthly father, and asks: 'If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?' (Luke xi. 13). But there are earthly fathers who give their children no bread; who are heedless of their children's wants. In this parable the comparison is made between an unjust judge, selfish and hard-hearted, dealing with a helpless woman, a stranger to him, who merely troubles him with her continual crying; and God, the Father of Mercy, listening to the cry of His own elect, His chosen ones, those who lie nearest to His heart. The comparison is infinite in its strength.

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It is impossible that God should not avenge the wrongs of His beloved ones.

'Nevertheless,' our Lord asks sorrowfully, when the Son of Man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?' (Luke xviii. 8). Faith to pray always and not faint. In the fierce persecutions which raged during the early ages of Christianity this parable must have been a secret spring of courage and strength, of which the oppressors knew nothing. St. John saw a vision of souls, slain for the Word of God, and heard them crying with a loud voice: 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost Thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?' (Rev. vi. 10). Parables and visions like these made the early Christians strong against all the storms of persecution.

But the parable has a certain application, a secondary one, to ourselves. We also are under the tyranny of an adversary, who seeks to destroy us. The sin which everyone finds at strife with goodness within him, is an enemy with no right to keep us in bondage, who is wickedly striving to keep full possession of our hearts. But so long as we cry to God for deliverance we are not hopelessly in bondage. Our besetting sin may be very subtle, and very powerful; still if we cease not to pray 'Deliver us from this evil,' God cannot fail to set us free. Possibly not all at once, as if by a miracle. The widow fought against her oppressor for a long time. Perhaps

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if she had gained her cause immediately, and had won her rights easily, she might have been careless in the future and allowed some other adversary to gain power over her. Her long season of bitter crying, before she could obtain deliverance, would set her evermore on her guard against fresh foes. It might be that, if God answered us at once, and set us free from sin, before we realised its strength and cunning, we should soon forget our misery and His mercy. It is good for us that He should sometimes seem deaf to our cry until sin has become hateful to us; otherwise that greatest of all adversaries would take possession of us — a self-righteous spirit. To such a spirit prayer is impossible.

XIII

The Pharisee and the Publican

Luke xviii. 9-14

'And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.'

The Pharisee and the Publican

AMONG our Lord's disciples were some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and set the rest at nought. One of the apostles was a publican; and many of the Lord's followers came from despised classes. 'Stand by thyself, come not near to me; for I am holier than thou,' was the feeling that had crept into their hearts. The subtle influence of the Pharisees, who were the religious men of the nation, had been too strong for them. Jesus denounced the religion of the Pharisees in the sharpest language; but still certain of His followers trusted in themselves because they kept the traditions of the elders, and despised those who were anxious only to obey the commandments of God.

This is a spirit which has nothing in common with the kingdom of heaven; a spirit entirely opposed to the idea of prayer. It is not possible for a self-righteous heart to hold communion with God.

Our Lord and His disciples were probably on their way to Jerusalem, when each of them would go up to the Temple to pray. Private prayer

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was much practised by the Jews in the Temple; and those living within reach of it went up daily at regular hours for personal worship. Naturally worshippers coming from a distance, as Jesus and His disciples did, would spend much of their time there. To go up to the Temple to pray was the purpose of them all, but they were going in very different spirits. Our Lord held up to them two types of men, types constantly before their eyes: the Pharisee, His deadly foe; the publican, a sinner whom Jesus had come to seek and to save.

The Pharisee never felt the tyranny of sin, and therefore did not cry for delivery from it. He loved to pray where he could be seen of men; when he gave alms he had a trumpet sounded before him; on fast days he disfigured his face, that all men might see he was fasting. When he prayed in the Temple he stood in a conspicuous place, where he was not overlooked in a crowd. Probably his lips uttered other words, but within himself he was saying, 'God, I thank Thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess' (Luke xviii. 11, 12). He felt there was one holy man in Jerusalem, and he was that man. He had no more to say to God. He felt no sins that needed pardon, and his prayer was ended. He went down to his house, having praise and glory of men.

The other worshipper was a publican, a tax-

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gatherer for the Roman governor, whom the people cursed as he passed by. So hated was he that the priests in the Temple would not suffer him to offer any gift of tithes there; if they could, they would have forbidden him even to enter the House of Prayer. It may have been a long time since he had ventured to go up thither; possibly never since he had taken to the degraded occupation of a tax-gatherer. But he felt the grievous burden of his sins; and he crept within the gates of the Temple, standing afar off from the Holy Place; aloof, like the Pharisee, from the other worshippers, who looked askance at him, as a sinner. He did not dare to lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, where the just God reigns. He smote upon his breast, as though he could smite the sin-laden heart within it, and cried: 'God be merciful to me a sinner!' (Luke xviii. 13). He felt there was one sinner in Jerusalem, and he was that man. His prayer, too, was ended; there was no need to say more. God heard his cry and had mercy on him. In his humble and contrite heart he felt that his sins were pardoned, and he went down to his house justified. The Pharisee had his reward; he was seen of men. The publican had his; he was seen of God.

There are two portraits here, but whose they are we cannot tell. Our Lord spoke this parable to certain persons (Luke xviii. 9), as a special lesson. Within the circle of His twelve com-

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panions there may have been those whose inmost souls recognised the likeness to themselves. Matthew, the publican, was there; and Simon the Zealot, who belonged to the strictest sect of the Jews, conspicuous for their fierce zeal for the ritual of Moses. Such zeal formed a poor ground for the good seed of the kingdom to spring up in. Of Simon we know nothing except his name, and that he remained among the apostles after our Lord's death. On the other hand, Matthew, the tax-gatherer, shares with John, the beloved disciple, the distinction and glory of having probably made a written record of his Master's life and teaching. He was chosen to give to the world the first Gospel. 'For every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted' (Luke xviii. 14). A beautiful sonnet, written by the late Archbishop Trench, will fitly give the lesson taught by these three parables—

'Lord, what a change within us one short hour
Spent in Thy presence, will suffice to make;
What heavy burdens from our bosoms take;
What parched ground refresh as with a shower!
We kneel, and all around us seems to lower.
We rise, and all—the distant and the near—
Stands forth in sunny outline, brave and clear.
Why, therefore, should we do ourselves this wrong
Or others, that we are not always strong;
That we are ever over-borne with care;
That we should ever weak, or heartless be,
Anxious or troubled, when with us is prayer,
And joy, and strength, and courage, are with Thee.'

XIV

The Rich Fool

Luke xii. 16-21

' And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully : And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits ? And he said, This will I do : I will pull down my barns, and build greater ; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years ; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee : then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided ? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.'

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WE now reach two parables on the use of riches. The first of these was spoken to a vast crowd of the common people, who heard Jesus gladly. 'There were gathered together an innumerable multitude of people, insomuch that they trode one upon another' (Luke xii. 1). Our Lord began by warning His disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy; and went on to forewarn them of the many persecutions and oppressions that must befall them. A man in the crowd, who had come with a grievance of his own, grew impatient, and interrupted Jesus with the ill-timed cry, 'Master, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me' (Luke xii. 13, R.V.). He paused in His address to His disciples, in order to give this great multitude a lesson concerning riches. To the man He answered by another question, 'Man, who made Me a judge or a divider over you?' The inheritance was no matter for Him to decide. Then to the multitude He said, 'Take heed, and keep yourselves' from all covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of things which he possesseth' (Luke xii. 15, R.V.).

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To be really rich, even in worldly riches, two things are necessary: there must be things to possess, and there must be the power of enjoying them; a blind man cannot be rich in pictures; a deaf man in musical instruments; nor a dead man in lands and money. To fix this lesson on the minds of those who were listening to Him, 'He spake a parable unto them.'

The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully; so plentifully that he had not room enough to store the fruits. He had been rich before, but now he had an embarrassing abundance of things. He was at once perplexed and exultant; full of selfish delight and glory in this profusion, and of a householder's anxieties to secure them for his own benefit. 'He reasoned within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have not where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my corn and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry' (Luke xii. 17-19, R.V.).

These were the thoughts of the man's heart; and there was much worldly wisdom in them. The barns he intended to make were probably cisterns dug in his ground in dry places, on the gentle slope of a hill, which could be made perfectly safe from damp and frost and heat. The entrance of such cisterns was closed with plaster, and a

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deep layer of soil spread over it. In these store-houses provisions were laid up for many years; and so well were they concealed in the fields and vineyards, that neither robbers nor foreign enemies could discover and break into them except through treachery. The rich man in this way could secure himself from the dread both of foes and famine. He might see his neighbours perish around him, but he had much goods laid up for many years, wheat and barley, oil and wine and honey in abundance. There was no need for him to be disquieted. He could lay up treasure where no mildew could corrupt, and where no thief could break through to steal. All his wealth was secure.

There was, however, one thing which he could not ensure—his own life. The corn and the fruits were his, but his soul belonged to the God who gave it. In his folly he had said, ‘Soul, take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry; thou hast much goods laid up for many years,’ and he had no power to keep the breath of life in his body for a single moment. As he was speaking thus to himself, God spoke to him: ‘Thou foolish one, this night do they require thy soul from thee; and the things which thou hast prepared, whose shall they be?’ The wisdom of the world was folly in the sight of God.

The rich man was not willing to commit his soul to God; it had to be required of him. He was torn away reluctantly from the goods in

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which his soul trusted. He had promised his soul that it should take its ease and be merry; now it was removed to another life. He had made provision for many years; he was to lose all that night. He had been counted a wise man; he was a fool!

‘So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God’ (Luke xii. 21). In all ages and all countries the selfish and covetous man is a fool in the eyes of God, in whose hands his soul is. For there is such a thing possible on earth as laying up treasure in heaven, of being rich toward God. Worldly men would exclaim against the folly of a merchant who anxiously gathered together riches in a country he was about to leave, which he could not carry with him to the country whither he was bound. Would it not be wiser for him to gather such riches as could go with him?

After speaking this parable to the multitude, our Lord resumed His address to His disciples. He had been bidding them not to be anxious for their lives, when they were dragged before rulers and judges by their persecutors. Now He bids them not to be anxious for the things which their bodies needed: the food and the raiment and the shelter. The ravens have no storehouse or barn, and the lilies neither toil nor spin, but God cares for them. ‘Of how much more value are ye?’ asks our Lord. ‘The life or soul is more than the food,’ He says. What unutterable folly, then,

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is it to occupy ourselves with things, whilst we leave our souls, which may at any moment be required from us, uncared for and neglected.

But as it is impossible to live in this world without being brought into some relationship with this world's goods, either our own or other people's, our Lord at another time spoke a parable to His disciples, teaching them that if they did not prove faithful stewards of the unrighteous mammon, that is, of earthly wealth, they would not be trusted by God with the true riches.



XV

The Unrighteous Steward

Luke xvi. 1-8

'And he said also unto his disciples, There was a certain rich man which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he had wasted his goods. And he called him, and said unto him, How is it that I hear this of thee? give an account of thy stewardship; for thou mayest be no longer steward. Then the steward said within himself, What shall I do? for my lord taketh away from me the stewardship: I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed. I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses. So he called every one of his lord's debtors unto him, and said unto the first, How much owest thou to my lord? And he said, An hundred measures of oil. And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and sit down quickly, and write fifty. Then said he to another, And how much owest thou? And he said, An hundred measures of wheat. And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and write fourscore. And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light.'

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THIS parable follows immediately upon that of the Prodigal Son, who had wasted his goods in riotous living. But these goods were his own portion of his father's substance; and though the folly was great, the crime was less than that of the steward that wasted his lord's goods. The rich man who had entrusted his property to a steward, heard of his wasteful living, and called him, and said, 'What is this that I hear of thee? render the account of thy stewardship; for thou canst be no longer steward' (Luke xvi. 2, R.V.).

Time was given to him to make up his accounts, and to clear himself if that was possible. This interval he employed in prudent deliberation for himself. 'What shall I do,' he said within himself, 'seeing that my lord taketh away the stewardship from me? I have not strength to dig; to beg I am ashamed. I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses' (Luke xvi. 3, 4, R.V.). He would make friends of the men who were debtors to his lord, whilst he had time and opportunity.

Their bonds or agreements were not yet

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completed. 'And calling to him each one of his lord's debtors, he said to the first, How much owest thou unto my lord? And he said, A hundred measures of oil. And he said unto him, Take thy bond, and sit down quickly and write fifty. Then said he to another, And how much owest thou? And he said, A hundred measures of wheat. He saith unto him, Take thy bond, and write fourscore' (Luke xvi. 5-7, R.V.). There was no time to be lost. Probably the steward himself had been commissioned by his lord to fix each year the amount of his tenants' rents for their fields and oliveyards; and he had thus the power to lessen the amounts he had already fixed upon. Once entered on their bonds, they were secure upon being called upon to pay the rental. In the case of the oliveyard, he reduced it by one-half; for the cornfield, only one-fifth. The difference was prudently made, because it was easier for outsiders to estimate how much corn a certain measure of land would produce, than how much oil an oliveyard might yield. The scheme, and the way it was carried out, were both full of worldly wisdom and tact.

'And his lord commended the unrighteous steward because he had done wisely' (Luke xvi. 8, R.V.). It was the contemptuous applause of a rich man for a clever trick. He acknowledged its shrewdness and prudence, but he did not restore him to his stewardship. He left him to the friendship and gratitude of the men whom he had

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helped to cheat their lord. How long would the dishonest debtors keep the unrighteous steward in their houses? 'For the sons of this world are for their own generation wiser than the sons of the light,' says our Lord. (Luke xvi. 8, R.V.) They see more clearly what is to their advantage; they seize their opportunities more eagerly. They are more busy in heaping up worldly riches than the sons of the light are in laying up treasure in heaven. But it is 'for their own generation' only; they have no wisdom, no prudence, for the real future beyond this life. The sons of light are as yet dwelling in the glimmering of the dawn; when the full noonday comes, they will be as wise in their generation as the sons of the world now are.

After this parable comes a passage which is one of the most obscure of our Lord's sayings. Probably we have only a fragment of what He said; and to His hearers the meaning was no doubt plain. The Revised Version of the New Testament makes it somewhat easier to understand than the older one, 'Make to yourselves friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when it shall fail, they may receive you into the eternal tabernacles' (Luke xvi. 9, R.V.). Though the bulk of His disciples were poor men, there were some among them who possessed earthly wealth, which our Lord calls the mammon of unrighteousness, for this reason, that in a perfect and sinless state we shall

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not hold separate and special goods, to be used solely for ourselves; we shall realise that dream of the early Church to have all things in common; and in the true brotherhood of the kingdom of God we shall need no such word as mine and thine.

But such followers of Christ as have earthly wealth are advised by Him to make friends by means of it, that when it shall fail, as fail it must when they come to die, these friends, who had received their help and alms in this life, might welcome them into the eternal tabernacles, where the alms they had given for Christ's sake would prove to be so much treasure laid up in heaven.

In the verses that follow, our Lord speaks of wealth as 'very little'; in our older version it is called 'the least.' 'He that is faithful in that which is least, is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least, is unjust also in much' (Luke xvi. 10). To deal wisely, justly, and unselfishly with money is the great test of our Lord's wealthy disciples. It is the least of God's gifts to His children; and if they are not faithful in this, the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to their trust the true riches? How can they increase in faith, and hope, and love, in righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost, if they use money in a selfish and worldly spirit? 'Ye cannot serve God and mammon,' said our Lord.

It would be well for us to remember oftener

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than we do that our Lord Himself was absolutely without these worldly goods. Without doubt He maintained Himself as a working-man until He entered upon His special ministry; but He possessed nothing. He had no house of His own; He had no money, for Judas had the bag, and bare what was put therein. Women also, many of them, ministered unto Him of their substance; and even to the last His mother wove His coat for Him, that vesture for which the soldiers cast lots, because it 'was without seam, woven from the top throughout' (John xix. 23). The possessive pronoun with Him was 'ours,' not 'mine' or 'thine.' As He was absolutely rich in righteousness, He was absolutely poor in the mammon of unrighteousness.

'And the Pharisees also, who were covetous' (Luke xvi. 14), heard the Parable of the Unrighteous Steward, and the words following, as well as the disciples, and they derided the poor man who spoke in such a manner about riches, of which He could know nothing. The steward He had spoken of was a wise man; for he had kept in some way within the letter of the law, or his lord would not have commended his wisdom; and yet he had secured a portion of goods for himself. They, too, were serving God, by fulfilling the law of Moses in its minutest details, and yet they were amassing riches. All the people acknowledged them to be the servants of God; the gold and the silver, the lands, the

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goods, and the riches of all kinds which they possessed, made them more prominently His servants. They had the chief places in the synagogues, they gave the largest alms, they offered the richest sacrifices. 'Who then can be saved?' they asked, as the disciples did. 'If it is easier for a camel to enter in through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God, then who can be saved?' (Luke xviii. 25, 26, R.V.). 'And the Pharisees also, who were covetous, derided Him' (Luke xvi. 14).

XVI

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Luke xvi. 19-31

' There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover, the dogs came and licked his sores. And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried, and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame. But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence. Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house: For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead.'

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YE cannot serve God and mammon,' said our Lord, after He had spoken to His disciples the Parable of the Unrighteous Steward ; 'and the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things ; and they scoffed at Him' (Luke xvi. 14, R.V.). Were not they serving God ? if not, who then were His servants ? The disciples themselves were perplexed when Jesus said to them, 'How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God !' (Luke xviii. 24). 'Then who can be saved ?' they asked in astonishment. For there is this glamour about wealth, that it not only secures the goods of this life, but it seems to give the promise of that which is to come. To observe all the outward forms of religion is easier for the rich than for the poor ; in the eyes of men the former have both leisure and means for serving God, which should ensure to them eternal life. 'But God knoweth your hearts,' said Christ to the Pharisees : 'for that which is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God' (Luke xvi. 15, R.V.).

Riches are no passport to the kingdom of

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heaven. Mammon can send no ambassador to the court of God. At the best wealth is but a hindrance; and the only use of it, as far as heaven is concerned, is to make friends by its means; that, when it shall fail, they may receive the rich man into the eternal tabernacles.

‘There was a certain rich man,’ said our Lord, speaking to the scoffing Pharisees, ‘and he was clothed in purple and fine linen, faring sumptuously every day’ (Luke xvi. 19, R.V.).

These few words presented a picture to them of very great wealth. He wore the costliest and most beautiful raiment, not at festivals only, but as his ordinary clothing; robes of the richest purple and purest white, such as kings and priests might wear, and such as the heathen gave to their idol gods. His daily food also was on a par with his clothing; for he fared sumptuously, and lived in mirth and splendour every day. He is not accused of any crime. Probably he was careful in observing all the minor precepts of the law, such as the Pharisees laid much stress upon; as to washing before meals, ‘and many other things there be which they have received to hold, as the washing of cups, and pots, brasen vessels, and of tables’ (Mark vii. 4). This daintiness would form a part of his luxury; a luxury highly esteemed among men. Though men might think he was serving God by such observances, he was simply a servant of mammon. For there are two ways of serving mammon; that of a selfish hoarding,

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and that of a selfish spending of riches. It was the latter way this rich man chose.

‘And a certain beggar named Lazarus was laid at his gate, full of sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table; yea, even the dogs came and licked his sores’ (Luke xvi. 20, 21, R.V.).

A painful, even a loathsome, picture in every point, a sharp and striking contrast to that of the rich man. The rich man lying on his couch at his sumptuously-furnished table; the beggar lying without at the gate, desiring, and perhaps desiring in vain, to be fed with the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table. The rich man clad in purple and fine linen; the beggar covered with sores. The rich man surrounded by obsequious friends and servants; the beggar at the mercy of the stray dogs, who licked his sores whilst they waited, like himself, for the fragments that might be flung out to them. Yet to this miserable creature a name was given by our Lord, the only name occurring in a parable, the name also borne by His beloved friend—Lazarus; that is, ‘God is my help.’

There would have been no difficulty for the rich man to alleviate the cruel lot of Lazarus. It was his bounden duty to do so. He could not plead ignorance of the condition of one who was laid at his own gate; of one whom he must have seen as he went in and out of his house. He even knew him by his name of Lazarus. But he

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was so wrapped up in self that he turned away his eyes from the sight of such misery and woe. It was too painful, he said, possibly; that is, too painful for him to see and think of, but not too painful for the beggar to endure.

We are not told how long this selfishness and this suffering dwelt side by side; but at last 'it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom' (Luke xvi. 22). Though God, as it seemed, left Lazarus uncared for in order to see what help the rich man would grant to him, He had not forsaken him. The angels were ready to carry him away as soon as death released him from the miserable body which had lain at the rich man's gate. Did the rich man miss him, and feel a thrill of relief that he had seen the last of Lazarus? But, probably a short time after, 'the rich man also died, and was buried.'

It is necessary for us to remember that our Lord was addressing the Pharisees; and that in so doing He employed Jewish metaphors, which conveyed a stronger and clearer meaning to them than they can do for us. At this point, moreover, the parable passes altogether from the sphere of earth, and enters upon that mysterious and hidden region of the dead, which can but vaguely be shadowed forth to us, even by metaphor. There is no language known to mortal men by which these things can be spoken; there can be no true analogy between this world and the next.

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The doctrine of resurrection and of future rewards and punishments is nowhere taught in the law of Moses, and was at the time of our Lord the subject of constant disputation between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisaic Rabbis had formed a most material conception of the unseen world, giving definite descriptions of it. According to some it was in the heart of the earth. Gehenna was on one side, with its flames and torments; Paradise was on the other, where Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were awaiting the arrival of their faithful descendants. Here there was a continual feast and rest; while in Gehenna there was perpetual unrest and anguish. In the parable before us these places are described as being within sight and hearing of each other.

Though Lazarus had been outwardly so miserable in this life, his heart had been right in the sight of God. In his wretchedness and woe he had served God as faithfully as the rich man in his luxury had served mammon. No sooner was he dead than he was carried away into Paradise; and it was in Abraham's bosom that this sad representative of earthly poverty was laid. No misery and no degradation, so that it is not sin, makes the soul incapable of loving and serving God.

The servant of mammon also died; in spite of all the help his riches could procure. No doubt his body would be buried with all possible pomp and splendour; but no angels were sent to take

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care of his unhoused soul. He, like Lazarus, had brought nothing into this world, and it is certain that he could carry nothing away. Neither riches nor glory could descend after him.

‘And in Gehenna he lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom’ (Luke xvi. 23, R.V.). The loss of everything was in itself torment: the sending away of all that had made life precious to him; the destruction of his god, mammon, whom he had so faithfully served;—all this was torturing to him. But beside this negative sense of loss there was a sense of active, powerful, intolerable anguish. He had passed through the gate of death, and found himself, not in Paradise with the faithful sons of Abraham, but in Gehenna; he, who had done no harm to anyone, had been thrust down into a place of torment! Both he and Lazarus were in the region of the dead; Lazarus whom he recollected well as the beggar full of sores, who had been too painful a sight for him to look upon. But now this beggar was lying in Abraham’s bosom, in the chief place of honour—the place that had always been allotted to himself whilst he was upon earth. Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom, and he himself far away from the festival; nay, even in a place of torment! No man had warned him of this; or if they had warned him, he had turned a deaf ear to their words. For he had been highly esteemed among men; and Lazarus yonder had been neglected and despised.

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‘Father Abraham,’ he cried, ‘have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame’ (Luke xvi. 24, R.V.). The sharp contrast that had existed between them on earth existed here still. Lazarus had desired only the crumbs falling from his table; now the rich man begged for nothing more than a drop of water. Lazarus had lain in anguish at his gate; now his hour of anguish was come. It was a small mercy he implored; but the hour was come for doing to him as he had done to others, for meting out to him with the same measure he had used in his life on earth. He cries to Abraham for mercy; let him show what mercy he had had upon Lazarus in his anguish.

But Lazarus, who is lying in Abraham’s bosom, can say nothing for him. This is all the answer Abraham can give: ‘Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now here he is comforted, and thou art in anguish. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, that they which would pass from hence to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from thence to us’ (Luke xvi. 25, 26, R.V.).

There is an intimation in these words of the compassion and goodwill that exists in the hearts of the blessed towards those who are doomed to a place of torment. Abraham addresses the rich

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man as 'Son,' not as 'Thou fool!' or as 'Thou wicked servant!' he acknowledges the relationship between them as still existing. Besides this, he intimates that there are some, even in Paradise, who would pass from it, if they were able, to succour the souls in Gehenna. But there is a great gulf fixed between the two states. Alas! all his life long the rich man had been ever digging this gulf deeper and deeper, by selfishly enjoying his good things and his pleasures, whilst leaving Lazarus to his evil things and his anguish. He had possessed the mammon of unrighteousness, and by means of it he might have made friends who, when it failed, would have welcomed him to the eternal tabernacles. His sin had been precisely that which is the only sin taken account of in the narrative of the final judgment, when those who are on the left hand of the Judge are doomed to go away into eternal punishment, because, when they saw the hungry they gave him no bread; the thirsty, and they gave him no drink; a stranger, and they took him not in; naked, and they clothed him not; sick, and in prison, and they visited him not (Matt. xxv. 41-43).

The rich dig the gulf between themselves and the poor; and if they make it impassable on earth, how can they expect to cross it in the world to come? As the rich man had felt it impossible to rise up from his seat of honour at table and carry help to Lazarus at his gate with his own hands, he had made it impossible for Lazarus to leave Abraham's

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bosom and to carry to him a moment's comfort to his anguish. But he might have crossed the gulf in those days ; now Lazarus was not able to pass over it.

The rich man had five brothers like himself, living contentedly with their own good things, and carelessly holding aloof from the miseries of their fellow-men. These he remembered in his sore anguish. They are at home yonder in the world, clothed in purple and fine linen, and living in mirth and splendour ; if they think at all of the hour of death, they are not troubled, for they are the sons of Abraham, and they are justified in the sight of men. They keep the small and easy laws scrupulously ; they pay tithe even of mint and rue, and all manner of herbs ; but they pass over the weightier matters of the law, such as judgment, mercy, and faith. Neither scribes nor Pharisees warn them of their danger.

'I pray thee therefore, father,' cries the rich man (because this great gulf cannot be passed over here), 'that thou wouldest send him to my father's house ; for I have five brethren ; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment' (Luke xvi. 27, 28, R.V.). It is not ^a selfish cry ; already, though in sore anguish, he is beginning to think of others than himself. If he can but save his brothers, it will be at least as good as a drop of water to cool his tongue : as good as a crumb falling from the feast which he sees afar off. And he has no doubt of

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the willingness of Lazarus to go on such an errand. The way back to earth is open to him, though there is no bridge across the gulf. Let Abraham give him leave, and he will hasten on the mission.

But Abraham saith, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them' (Luke xvi. 29). Had they not heard them? Had not he himself heard them often? But now he recollects how that, having eyes, he had not seen; having ears, he had not heard; and how his heart had grown too gross with earthly goods for him to understand. Moses and the prophets had said little or nothing about the world to come; but they taught clearly and definitely the duties of man to man, and he had failed to obey. It was the same with his five brothers. Religion was a mere ornament of their lives. They were listening daily to the words of Moses and the prophets, and they were to them only as 'a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument.' They were not without pleasurable religious feelings; but the beggars lay at their gate unheeded or detested. Something must be done to shock them out of this terrible indifference.

'Nay, father Abraham!' he pleads' urgently, 'but if one go to them from the dead, they will repent.' Poor soul! Would they listen to Lazarus, the beggar, who lay at their gate, full of sores? And if they would listen, what language could he use but such as they are already familiar with?

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There is no speech on earth in which to tell the mysteries of heaven and hell. They have heard of the place of torment as well as of Paradise. Lazarus could say nothing that would shock them out of their selfishness and self-righteousness.

'If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, if one rise from the dead' (Luke xvi. 31, R.V.), replied Abraham. So far from being brought to repentance, they would not even believe that one had returned from the grave. No sight can ever create faith; for sights are things seen, and faith deals only with things unseen. A sight, an apparition, a miracle, may startle and interest the mind, but it leaves the spirit untouched. No doubt conscience, which is the voice of God in the spirit of man, had spoken to the rich man and his five brethren, and if they turned a deaf ear to that voice, how could they believe, even if one rose from the dead?

Then we lose sight for ever of the rich man.

The Pharisees, who had heard the Parable of the Unrighteous Steward, and scoffed at Jesus for it and the lesson He drew from it, were taught distinctly that they would be judged for the use they made of riches. If they served mammon, they would never receive the reward of the servants of God.

There are two vices specially attributable to the Pharisees: hypocrisy and covetousness. It is against these two sins that our Lord utters His strongest denunciations. His own poverty was a

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protest against the idea that riches were the best things of this life. So earnestly did He teach this, that in the Gospel of St. Luke we have the words: 'Blessed are ye poor,' 'Blessed are ye that hunger now,' 'Blessed are ye that weep now' (Luke vi. 20, 21, R.V.). It is certain that He taught that poverty and hunger are not so great hindrances to entering into His kingdom as the possession of wealth and prosperity and happiness. No true Christian can envy the lot of those who are 'clothed in purple and fine linen, and fare sumptuously every day.'

XVII

The Labourers in the Vineyard

Matt. xx. 1-16

'For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the market-place, And said unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Whystand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive. So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, Saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.'

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OUR Lord was going up to Jerusalem, where He was about to keep His last passover with the disciples. It was in the spring-time; and in the many vineyards through which they passed there was much work going on. The vines were being more straitly bound to their stakes, and their wandering shoots pruned off, and the soil about their roots was being carefully loosened, that the dews and rains might moisten them. It was not such merry labour as at the vintage, when the ripe grapes are gathered; for all seed-time is less joyous than the harvest. But it was more important; the success of the harvest depended upon the goodness of the work done in the spring; and those labourers who were called to work among the budding vines had much entrusted to them.

As the Lord and His disciples were on their way, a young man—not improbably the owner of some of the rich vineyards through which they were passing—came running towards them, and knelt down to Jesus. ‘Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?’ (Matt. xix. 16, R.V.) he asked. He had kept all the

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commandments from his youth up; he wanted to know what he lacked yet. Jesus told him he must sell all that he had and give to the poor; then he should have treasure in heaven. 'And come, follow Me,' added our Lord. This saying was too hard for the young man, and he went away sad and sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Then Peter began to say, 'Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed Thee; what shall we have therefore?' Jesus answered, 'Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for My sake, and the gospel's, but he shall receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions, and in the world to come eternal life. But many that are first shall be last; and the last first' (Mark x. 29-31).

Yet though our Lord gave Peter this full answer, there was a worldly spirit of bargaining in his question, as there had been in the question put by the rich young man, which is altogether opposed to the spirit of the kingdom of heaven. God does not give us eternal life as wages for so much work done; it is His free gift in Jesus Christ our Lord. He permits us, indeed, to lay up treasure in heaven; but life is His gift, and we can do nothing to earn it. How much life we have depends upon the spirit in which we

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receive His gift. If we make a bargain with God, we shall get our terms—so much pay for so much work; but no more than that. If we trust Him, as little children trust their father, doing His work with simple and child-like hearts, we shall be amazed at the abundance of the life granted to us.

‘For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard’ (Matt. xx. 1). The men had no right to work in the vineyard until the owner bade them; but there were plenty of labourers waiting to be hired. The first band made a bargain with the householder, agreeing for a penny a day,—that is, about 7½d.,—probably the usual wages for a day’s work.

This was about six o’clock in the morning; at nine, at noon, and at three in the afternoon the householder found other men standing idle in the market-place, and sent them into his vineyard, saying to each band, ‘Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right I will give you’ (Matt. xx. 4). None of these men made any bargain; part of the day was already gone, and they were glad to get even a few hours’ work, leaving the payment to the owner’s generosity.

But when the day was drawing to a close, and only about one hour for work was left, the householder went out, and found other men still standing idle. ‘Why stand ye here all the day

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idle?' he asked. And they answered, 'Because no man hath hired us' (Matt. xx. 6, 7). All the day they had waited to be hired, and seen their more fortunate fellow-labourers busy in the vineyard; but their hope of getting work to do had grown faint as the sun went down. They must go home as poor as when they set out in the morning; hungry and down-hearted; and their children must go supperless to bed. Even an hour's wages would be a boon to them. They were weary of their long idleness, and most probably they worked with great vigour and industry during the single hour that remained before the day was done.

Then the lord of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first' (Matt. xx. 8). Those who had made no agreement with him received each a penny, a full day's wages. But when the first, business-like, bargain-making men came, they expected to receive more; and they murmured against the householder, saying, 'These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day' (Matt. xx. 12). They did not consider that it had been by no fault of their own that the last band of labourers had not been hired at the beginning of the day; neither had they escaped the heat complained of, the dry parching east wind, from the effects of which none could shelter himself. They had

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bargained for a penny, but now they wanted more, and grudged the payment made to their fellow-labourers.

But the lord of the vineyard answered one of them, probably the loudest grumbler amongst them, asking him, 'I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?' (Matt. xx. 13-15).

The lord of the vineyard can be no other than God, and His vineyard is the world, wherein we can render service to our fellow-men. The hired labourers are those whom God calls to this service: those who are waiting to be called, and willing to labour. Such were the rich young man and the apostles who were following the Lord. The one had been called in his early youth, and had diligently kept the commandments; the others had gone into the vineyard, each obeying Christ's call, at different ages and under different circumstances. It is the same with each one of us. We are called to consider the claims of God and our fellow-men upon us, at divers times, and under divers circumstances; but those who at once do His bidding and go to labour in His vineyard, are all equal in loyal obedience. The command may reach us in early childhood, or in old age. The chief question is, are we willing to obey it?

But in any case can we be said to deserve

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wages? There are rewards, as of free gift, in the kingdom of heaven; that stimulus is not lacking. We cannot miss receiving a recompense. But wages? When we look at our poor, faulty, clumsy, and often foolish efforts to do good to our fellow-men, we feel like unskilled labourers, who break off the delicate tendrils of the vines instead of training them to bear fruit. The owner of the vineyard would be just if he turned us out of the spot where we are doing mischief rather than good. Were we to keep, or think we keep, all God's commandments, as the rich man did, or were we literally to forsake all for Christ, as the apostles did, we should still be compelled to say, 'We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which it was our duty to do.' There can be no question of wages.

Yet a price was paid, which seemed to be either wages or a free gift, according to the spirit of the labourers who received it. 'They received every man a penny.' What was this payment? The question of the rich young man gives us the answer, 'What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?' Jesus Christ replied also to Peter's question, that those who forsook all to become His disciples should in the world to come inherit eternal life. This, then, is the fee given to all the labourers in God's vineyard. It seems to be the same; but it is not. The worth of it varies with every man who receives it. For what is eternal life? 'This is life eternal,' says our Lord,

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'that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent' (John xvii. 3). How distinct is each man's knowledge of God from any other man's! The labourers in the vineyard regarded its owner with very different eyes. To the first band whom he hired he seemed a hard task-master, even partial and unjust; they looked at him with discontent. The last band looked upon him as a bountiful, open-handed lord, who had liberally provided them with all they needed for the night that was closing in. Each man knew the lord of the vineyard; but each man knew him after a different manner from his fellow-labourers.

Is it possible, then, for those who know the only true God, and His Son Jesus Christ, in any measure, to indulge in an evil and grudging spirit against their brethren? Alas! it is possible to faulty, selfish, human nature. There are those who ask, silently in their own hearts or aloud, 'What shall we gain by serving God, and our fellow-men?' If the gain they seek is simply a worldly one, they will get that, and nothing more. If there is some, even a slight, desire after spiritual gain, that, too, they shall get. But it will not be enough to deliver them from the discontented and grudging heart with which they will see the happiness of those who work for God and their fellow-men out of simple love and faith. To every soul eternal life is what the soul desires.

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Only one day's work is spoken of in the parable ; there would be a morrow, perhaps, when again they would be hired into the vineyard. We may hope that the loud-spoken grumbler made no bargain the next morning. Let us hope, too, that the rich young man whom Jesus loved did, by and by, sell all that he had, and that he followed Him, even through persecutions, into eternal life. But both he and they had missed their chance of being first in the kingdom of heaven. They had borne the burden and heat of the day, and he had kept the commandments from his youth up ; but it had been done for wages, and there are no wages in that kingdom. Jesus went on to Jericho ; and there Zaccheus met them, a publican and a sinner, coming into the vineyard at the latest hour ; surely the last in the kingdom of heaven. But he of his own choice adopted the test the rich young man refused. Half of his goods he gave to the poor ; and out of the other half he restored fourfold what he might have taken unjustly from any man. 'So the last shall be first, and the first last,' says our Lord (Matt. xx. 16).

But even though last, they are the last in the kingdom of heaven ; they are not cast out of that kingdom. 'For many be called, but few chosen,' our Lord adds. We must not take as the opposite of this word chosen the word rejected. It seems to mean selected or preferred, eminent or perfect. Our Lord called many disciples, but

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out of those He chose only twelve to be His apostles. Of the twelve apostles He chose three to be His more intimate companions. Of the three there was one whom He especially loved. How and why the choice is made we cannot know. But one thing is certain: not one is among the chosen, though he may be among the called, who serves God for gain, and grudges His love and mercy to any of his fellow-men. An old Indian saying is, 'Many are in the procession, but few are the light-bearers.'

XVIII

The Good Samaritan

Luke x. 25-37

'And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou? And he, answering, said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself. And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live. But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour? And Jesus, answering, said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow, when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee. Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.'

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OUR Lord, after seeing the rich young man and speaking to his disciples the Parable of the Bargain-Makers, or the Labourers in the Vineyard, went on to Jericho, where Zaccheus received them joyfully, and immediately gave up the half of his goods to the poor, and promised that if he had taken anything unjustly from any man he would restore him fourfold.

The story of the Good Samaritan falls into its position here; for following the parable comes the passage, 'Now as they went on their way, He entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received Him into her house.' This village was Bethany. It lies on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, not far from the point where the steep and stony road, infested by robbers, ran down to Jericho.

At that time Jericho was a rich and fashionable town, warmer than Jerusalem, and therefore the winter resort of the wealthy people living there. It was also a city or station of the priests; and both priests and Levites passed frequently to and fro between Jerusalem and Jericho. Merchants also, such as the Samaritan probably was, were

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constantly carrying on business between the two cities.

This story is more like a true narrative than a parable; but Jesus Christ took it and applied it as one of those parables of our daily life from which, if we were wise, we should always be learning new lessons.

Two questions of Peter's had given rise to two parables. 'How oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?' (Matt. xviii. 21), had led our Lord to speak the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. His question, 'Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed Thee; what shall we have therefore?' (Matt. xix. 27), had been answered by the Parable of the Bargain-Makers. A third question was now put, not by Peter, but by a certain lawyer, possibly one of the foes who were seeking to catch Him in some error. He stood up and tempted Jesus, asking Him almost in the same words the same question the rich young man had asked a day or two before: 'Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus answered the young man, 'Keep the commandments'; but to the lawyer He said, 'What is written in the law? how readest thou?'

One who was learned in the law must have come to Him with such a question in a very different spirit from the young man who, seeing Him pass by on His way to Jerusalem, ran eagerly to Him to seek for instruction in winning eternal life.

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It would seem as if Jesus Christ was now surrounded again by a congregation of hearers, not merely His band of companions and disciples; the expression, 'a certain lawyer stood up,' implies this. They were all familiar with the road between Jerusalem and Jericho; its roughness, and its perils from robbers. They knew the inn where travellers found a resting-place and a refuge. Daily they saw priests, Levites, and merchants passing to and fro. The circumstances that form the narrative were not in the least degree strange. It was less like a parable than a true statement; only the application, the special turn given to the very probable occurrence, was unfamiliar.

There was only one answer possible for the lawyer when our Lord referred him to his own knowledge of the law. The commandments had been summed up for him by the law-giver, Moses; and he answered Jesus Christ, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.'

'Thou hast answered right,' said our Lord: 'this do, and thou shalt live' (Luke x. 27, 28).

'But who is my neighbour?' asked the scribe. These two commandments were 'exceeding broad'; but the Lord's Parable of the Good Samaritan made the second commandment broader still. In the kingdom of heaven the relationship of neighbour and brother differ altogether from

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earthly relationships. The men of old time had said, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.' This last clause had been added to the law of Moses, and the lawyer hoped there would be a difficulty in defining who was a neighbour. Our Lord practically changed the question from 'Who is my neighbour?' into 'To whom can I be a neighbour?'

'A certain man,' He said, 'was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he fell among robbers, which both stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance a certain priest was going down that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side' (Luke x. 30, 31, R.V.). There were good reasons for passing on. The road was full of hiding-places, where the robbers might be lurking in hope of other prey; it was a painful and perilous office to look to the wounded man; the priest was alone, as the poor man had been; and if he tarried, it would probably be to share the same fate. Here was an opportunity for the priest, who was emphatically the servant of God, to fulfil his service by showing pity to a fellow-countryman; but he missed the golden moment, and went on his way, saddened, perhaps, but not touched by true compassion.

It was the same thing when a Levite passed by, one of the humbler ministers of the Temple. He, too, was travelling alone, and to linger in such a spot was dangerous. Possibly he may

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have known that the priest had passed by before him ; and if a priest did not consider it his duty to succour the wounded man, how could he suppose it was his own ? Both priest and Levite knew well that the law of Moses enjoined, 'Thou shalt not see thy brother's ass or his ox fall down in the way, and hide thyself from them' (Deut. xxii. 4). But here was their brother himself, wounded, naked, half dead, lying by the roadside ; and they saw him, and crossed over to the other side, and hastened on their journey as if he had no claim upon them.

But a certain Samaritan journeyed that way, and came where he was. If there was peril for the priest and Levite, it was tenfold greater for him ; for he was one of an alien race, and none would avenge his death if he fell into the hands of the robbers ; the half-dead man himself, could he recognise him, would have regarded him as an enemy. This man was neither brother, nor neighbour, nor fellow-countryman of the Samaritan ; and as he lay stripped of all he had, there could be no likelihood of getting a reward. But the Samaritan was moved with compassion, and came to him, and bound up his wounds, as if they had been in some safe shelter, pouring on them oil and wine. Then setting him on his own beast, himself walking on foot slowly along the rugged and dangerous road, he brought him to the inn, and watched by him all night, 'taking care' of him.

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He was not a rich man ; for on the morrow all the money he could spare was twopence. It was a small sum, probably about as much as two days' wages for a labourer ; and the charges at the inn would be for food only. But the wounded man needed raiment as well as food ; and the Samaritan could just then do no more than leave him with the host, saying, 'Take care of him ; and whatsoever thou spendest more, I, when I come back again, will repay thee' (Luke x. 35, R.V.). He was going either to Jerusalem or Jericho for a day or two, and intended to return by the same route. The wounded man must not suffer while he was away on his business ; he left him at his charge at the inn.

'Which of these three, thinkest thou, proved neighbour unto him that fell among the robbers ?' asked our Lord.

'He that shewed mercy on him,' answered the lawyer.

'Go, and do thou likewise,' said Jesus (Luke x. 36, 37, R.V.).

Thus, once for all, was answered the question, 'Who is my neighbour ? who is my brother ?' No men could be more at enmity than the Jews and Samaritans, who dwelt in close neighbourhood to one another. They hated each other with a perfect hatred. 'Thou art a Samaritan, and hast a devil !' was the most malicious reproach hurled against our Lord. If, then, a Samaritan could prove himself a true neighbour to a Jew, loving

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him like himself, all men under the sun were brethren.

This was the plain and only meaning to those who heard the parable from our Lord's own lips. But very soon a deeper meaning, which could not be seen by their eyes, was discovered in it. It became to the early Christians an allegory, in which the wounded man, leaving Jerusalem, the holy city, and going down to Jericho, the accursed city, falling among robbers, and left by them stripped and wounded, yet with life lingering in him, was the very emblem of man in his misery and peril. No help is there for him in any outward rites and ceremonies, or any mere knowledge of the law of God; these are like the priest and Levite who saw the dying man and passed by on the other side. But the Lord Himself comes, the Helper of His enemies, the Saviour of His foes; He comes as our neighbour and our brother, a man like ourselves, who with His own hands binds up our wounds and takes care of us. He loved us, and gave His life for us.

The first question asked by the lawyer was, 'Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' If we carefully bear in mind the words of our Lord, 'This is life eternal, that they might know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent' (John xvii. 3), we shall trace the answer to that question underlying the Parable of the Good Samaritan. 'For it is by love alone that we can understand God, and His Son our Lord.

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And the more we love our fellow-men, and show mercy on them, the more shall we understand of the love and mercy of God. Every act of mercy and love brings us to a clearer knowledge of the Divine Love, which is of all mysteries the deepest, and altogether unfathomable. Eternal Life and Eternal Love are the inheritance of all those who 'have known God, or rather are known of God' (Gal. iv. 9).

XIX

The Barren Fig-tree

Luke xiii. 6-9

'He spake also this parable : A certain man had a fig-tree planted in his vineyard : and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig-tree, and find none : cut it down ; why cumbereth it the ground ? And he, answering, said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it : And if it bear fruit, well ; and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.'

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OUR Lord had just finished His address contained in the twelfth chapter of Luke, the chief part of which was spoken to His disciples, beginning with 'Beware ye of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.' In the course of His address He taught the people by the Parable of the Rich Man; and towards the close He again spoke to the multitude, urging them to take heed to the signs of the times.

The Revised Version says: 'Now there were some present at that very season which told Him of the Galilæans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices' (Luke xiii. 1). Now we know that the scribes and Pharisees were laying wait for Him, and seeking to catch something out of His mouth that they might accuse Him. Surely they might suppose this Prophet from Galilee would be moved to indignant utterances against the Roman ruler when He heard that His fellow-countrymen had been massacred, whilst worshipping Jehovah, in the most solemn rite of sacrifice. But our Lord received this intelligence in silence as regarded the actual outrage; yet founded upon it His oft-repeated call to repent-

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ance : 'Nay : but except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.'

He said 'all'; not the common people only, but the scribes and Pharisees, the holy men from Jerusalem. To them He at once addressed a warning parable.

Fruit trees—the fig, olive, and palm—were held in such estimation among the Jews that it was considered an offence against both God and man to cut one down, even if it bore only a small quantity of fruit. They were planted in the best soil of the vineyards, and let to grow freely, whilst the vines were bound and pruned very closely. If a fig-tree failed to bear fruit the third year after being planted, it was pronounced barren, and it was the imperative duty of the husbandman to cut it down, as it sucked in by its roots the juices of the soil which would otherwise enrich the neighbouring plants. He had frequently and carefully dug about it, and had diligently removed every stone from among the roots. If, after all this care, the fig-tree produced nothing but leaves, it deserved its doom.

This parable refers to times already past. The fig-tree was a symbol of the Jewish nation; the vineyard a type of the world; or, at least, of God's kingdom upon earth; for He owned not only the fig-tree, but the vineyard, and the fruits thereof. All were under one owner, even Christ, who, using another metaphor, said : 'Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold' (John x. 16).

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The Jews had been favoured and disciplined above all other nations. Again and again they had been called to true righteousness. Even so late as the baptism of John the Baptist, he had said to the Pharisees and scribes, 'Ye offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance. . . . Even now is the axe laid unto the root of the trees' (Luke iii. 7-9, R.V.). But their season of grace was over. The vine-dresser had pleaded for the fig-tree; but even he said: 'If the tree bear no fruit, thou shalt cut it down.'

If the parable is not retrospective, it must mean that even yet, after the consummation of their great crime, that would be forgiven if they brought forth fruits meet for repentance. Yet the chief bitterness in the life of our Lord was that He knew the irrevocable doom had been pronounced. 'When He was come near, He beheld the city, and wept over it, saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes' (Luke xix. 41, 42).

The religious rulers of the Jews had brought forth leaves in abundance. They invented binding rules, as to washing the hands before eating, and making clean the outside of cups and platters. They tithed mint and rue, and all manner of herbs, but passed over judgment and the love of God. They prayed in public, and made broad

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their phylacteries. They loaded men with burdens grievous to be borne. But worst of all, they made the Word of God of none effect through their traditions. Ritualism had taken the place of righteousness. A form of worship pleasing to the senses had superseded the worship of God as a Spirit, only to be worshipped in spirit and in truth.

But the Parable of the Barren Fig-tree is applicable to us all; especially to those who from their birth have been planted, like the fig-tree, in a good and chosen soil. Many of us have been carefully trained into the knowledge and observances of the Christian religion. We know its books; we accept its creeds; we observe its seasons. It is quite easy and quite natural to put forth abundant leaves, and display all the external signs of religion. It may be that the more means of grace we attend, and the more good works we attempt, the more careless we become as to the real growth of true godliness within. When God looks for fruit, will our Lord have to plead: 'Let it alone this year also'?

XX

The Great Supper

Luke xiv. 12-24

'Then said he also to him that bade him, When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompense be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just.'

'And when one of them that sat at meat with him heard these things, he said unto him, Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God. Then said he unto him, A certain man made a great supper, and bade many: And sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready. And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come. So that servant came, and shewed his lord these things. Then the master of the house, being angry, said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind. And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room. And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say unto you, That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper.'

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AT the time our Lord spoke this parable He was wandering, poor, homeless, and an exile, about the region of Perea, followed and closely watched by His foes the Pharisees. One of these invited Him to eat bread with him on the Sabbath day in his house, where a large number of guests were assembled. It would seem as if our Lord's enemies had purposely placed full in His sight an afflicted person, to see if He would work a miracle on the Sabbath day; for, 'behold, there was a certain man before Him which had the dropsy.' Jesus asked these two questions, to which they could give no answer: 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath day? Which of you shall have an ox or an ass fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the Sabbath day?' (Luke xiv. 3, 5). He healed the man and let him go; and then, seeing the strife for the most honourable places among those which were bidden, He gave some instructions, both to the guests and to His host, as to how they were to give and accept hospitality.

One of them that sat at meat with Him said: 'Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom

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of God' (Luke xiv. 15). All present knew that the words 'the kingdom of God' would stir the very heart of Jesus, and draw from Him some of His most characteristic teaching. The speaker, who was probably one of the chief Pharisees, felt sure that he at least, being not only a Jew but among the most religious of the people, would be a partaker in the glorious festival which would usher in the kingdom of God. Jesus therefore spoke this parable specially to the Pharisees.

A certain man made a great supper, and bade many, giving them due invitations beforehand; not simply such as we may suppose Jesus Himself had received, as He left the synagogue on the Sabbath day, to come in 'and eat bread.' A slight excuse is sufficient in declining such an informal invitation. But these guests had been asked to a great supper; and when the time was come a servant was sent round to their dwellings, as was the custom of the country, to tell them that 'all things were now ready.' Great preparations had been made, and much trouble taken by the host. But they all with one consent—having, it seems, agreed beforehand what they would do—began to make excuse; and their excuses were trivial and insulting. They had purposely fixed upon this day for other engagements which might have been fulfilled at other times; none of their circumstances arose from unforeseen and unavoidable accidents. The first was so full of pride in a new possession that he must needs go and see a piece of ground

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which he had bought that very day. The second was absorbed in business, and was going to prove five yoke of oxen which he was about to buy. Both of these were willing to utter fair words of civility, saying: 'I pray thee have me excused.' But they would not go to the feast.

The third invited guest was more satisfied with his excuse, and said abruptly: 'I cannot come: I have married a wife.' None of these things, the going to see a newly-bought piece of land, or proving the oxen, or having a marriage feast, was in itself wrong; but the doing of them at this time, when they were pledged to their friend's feast, was full of manifest indifference, even of unfriendliness, to their host, who had made large preparations for their entertainment. Not one of them could say: 'I am ill,' or, 'My child is dying,' or, 'I am called away suddenly on a necessary journey.' The excuses made were so many insults.

The master of the house, angry at this insolent neglect from those whom he had regarded as his special friends, bade his servant 'go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind' (Luke xiv. 21). These were the guests whom Jesus had recommended shortly before to His host, as being unable to recompense him, adding, 'for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just.' They were guests who would come quickly and joyfully as soon as they received his bidding, for they had no land

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bought and no oxen to prove, and if anyone had married a wife, the supper would make a wedding feast for him. So before long the servant came again to his master, saying, 'Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room' (Luke xiv. 22).

Then the Lord answered, 'Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled' (Luke xiv. 23). There would be more difficulty in gathering in the outcasts and vagrants who were without the walls of the city, than there had been with the poor who dwelt within them, and who knew something of the master of the house and the feast he had prepared. They would need a friendly force to make them understand and believe they would be welcome at the feast; and so the servant 'must compel them to come' into the rich man's house and sit down at his table. If anything more than a friendly force had been meant, more than one servant must have been sent with the message.

But the house should be filled and the feast eaten. If those who were first, and so long beforehand, invited, thought there would be no feast because they absented themselves, that the house would be empty and the tables bare of guests, they were fully mistaken. The house would be filled with a joyous company, and the tables be encircled with happy faces; and if any of the first-bidden changed their minds and sought to enter in, they should not even taste of that supper.

The Great Supper

There were few persons present who would be unable to read the meaning of this parable. God had long ago, in many ways, been calling the chief men among the Jews—the priests and elders, the scribes and Pharisees—to come into His kingdom. They professed to hold themselves ready to obey His call. Now He sent Jesus Christ as His servant to say that the fulness of time had come, all things were ready ; the kingdom of God was not only at hand, but was among them. We may be sure that our Lord had not always been in antagonism with the priests and elders, the scribes and Pharisees. He had sought them first, as being the religious men of the nation ; He had called the Temple where they ministered ‘ His Father’s house ’ (John ii. 16). The kingdom of God was first open to them, and they turned away from it. The pride and business and pleasure of this world were more to them than the spiritual benefits of the kingdom of heaven.

Then Jesus Christ had turned to the publicans and sinners, to the poor and the common people. They heard Him gladly ; ‘ great multitudes went with Him.’ At the moment He was speaking this parable, those who were ‘ the poor, and the halt, and the maimed, and the blind,’ were coming in from the streets and lanes of the city in obedience to His call. Yet when all were gathered in, there would still be room.

Then would God send His servant out into the wilderness beyond the bounds of the city, and the

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heathen who had never heard of Him should be called with solemn urgency, and with all the force possible to exercise upon free spirits they would be compelled to come into the kingdom. They might not respond to the call as readily and joyfully as those who felt that they were the chosen people of God, although they were poor and halt and maimed and blind. But by kindly compulsion the heathen would at last come in, and the Father's house would be filled with guests.

Our Lord concluded the parable with these words: 'For I say unto you, That none of those men that were bidden shall taste of my supper' (Luke xiv. 24). It may have sounded but a light penalty in the case of some of the guests; but it was in other words the solemn sentence Jesus afterwards pronounced upon the Jews: 'Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof' (Matt. xxi. 43).

The immediate result of the speaking of this parable by our Lord was that 'there went great multitudes after Him'; and that 'then drew near unto Him all the publicans and sinners for to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them' (Luke xv. 1, 2).

XXI

The Lost Sheep

Luke xv. 3-7

'Ana he spake this parable unto them, saying, What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, That likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.'

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SHORTLY after the occasion on which our Lord spoke the parable of the Great Supper, there arose another opportunity for again warning the Pharisees, who were hanging about Him, for ever on the watch against Him. In His last parable He had shown how the publicans and sinners, those who were the halt, the lame, the maimed, the blind, were admitted to the great supper, whilst the scribes and Pharisees, excluded by their own trifling excuses, were not permitted even to taste of that feast. 'All the publicans and sinners were drawing near unto Him to hear Him,' marvelling at the gracious kindness of His words and manner towards them. Then 'both the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them' (Luke xv. 1, 2, R.V.). It was an old grievance. We find a similar expression of wonder and discontent uttered by the Pharisees at an earlier period, when Jesus called Matthew, the publican, to follow Him as one, of His chosen twelve (Mark ii. 14-17). Our Lord rebuked them then, saying, 'They that are whole have no need of a physician, but they that are

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sick. But go ye and learn what this meaneth, I desire mercy, and not sacrifice : for I came not to call the righteous, but sinners' (Matt. ix. 12, 13, R.V.). They were so righteous in the minute fulfilling of little laws, that they were unconscious of sin. But the publicans and sinners, who were open transgressors, were at least free from the crowning sin, which our Lord denounced more than all others — hypocrisy. On the former occasion Jesus compared Himself to a physician, now He compares Himself with a shepherd, seeking and saving that which is lost.

'What man of you,' He asked, 'having a hundred sheep, and having lost one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?' (Luke xv. 4, R.V.). The scribes and Pharisees, who were well read in the law and the prophets, could not be ignorant of that passage in the Book of Isaiah, where the prophet says, 'All we like sheep have gone astray ; we have turned every one to his own way' (Isa. liii. 6). And in the Temple service, when the Psalms were chanted, each one of them must have joined in the words, 'I have gone astray like a lost sheep : seek Thy servant ; for I do not forget Thy commandments' (Ps. cxix. 176). They were familiar, too, with the simile which compared the Jews, as a chosen nation, with a flock of sheep tended by one shepherd. But if they could not regard themselves as having gone astray, they were ready

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to affirm that the publicans and sinners had wandered far away from the fold, and were in imminent danger of perishing. They, the Pharisees, might be like the ninety and nine left in safety in the pasture-lands of the wilderness; but there was no doubt of the publicans being rightly represented by the lost sheep. They had broken away from the fold of the law, and had strayed far away on to the dark mountains of unrighteousness.

But if no man amongst them would willingly lose one sheep, though he had ninety and nine in his fold, so Christ could not consent to leave one class of His fellow-men to perish. Nay, this was the very class He had come to seek and to save. He came into the world, the true Shepherd (not a hireling), whose own the sheep are, and He was giving His life for them. The publicans and sinners had wandered so far and so long from God that they were lost, and knew no way by which they could return. They were caught in the labyrinth of their iniquities and were bewildered, and ever going farther away, like silly sheep which know not the way to the fold. Their feet were stumbling on the dark mountains, and there was no shepherd to seek them. Yet they belonged to the fold of God, the same fold as the Pharisees themselves; and as long as they were missing, the flock was incomplete. The ninety and nine must be left in the wilderness, therefore, whilst He went amongst

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the sinful and depraved, seeking those who were lost.

Now Christ had found the lost sheep. 'All the publicans and sinners were drawing near unto Him to hear Him.' They heard His voice and were following Him; for they knew His voice, though they knew not the voice of strangers. He was calling His own sheep by name, and leading them back to the one flock. He was bearing His lost one, as it were, upon His shoulders; and was about to carry it home rejoicing. As the man in the parable did not take back his lost sheep to the fold in the wilderness, from which it had strayed, and where the ninety and nine were remaining, but carried it *home* rejoicing, so Christ was not about to bring back the publicans and sinners to the strait, and strict, and narrow fold of the law in which the Pharisees were confined. They were to belong to the one flock under the one Shepherd, who was about to lay down His life for them, and so open to them the everlasting pastures. Their fold was to be at home, not in the wilderness.

'And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost' (Luke xv. 6). The friends at home had known of his loss; they had watched him as he set forth on his perilous search. It was natural that they should come together to rejoice over the sheep which had

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been the cause of so much anxiety and dangerous toil. The ninety and nine, who were safe in their fold in the wilderness, were scarcely thought of. The rescued one, with all the marks of hardship on it, the torn wool and the bramble and the briar clinging to it, was the centre of attention and interest.

Then said our Lord, speaking with authority, as one who knew of heavenly things, '*I say unto you, that even so there shall be joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine righteous persons, which need no repentance*' (Luke xv. 7, R.V.). Not merely over a ransomed world shall there be joy in heaven, Christ says, but over each sinner. He seeks to save every individual soul, and rejoices over that one soul when it repents 'as if beside nor man nor angel lived in heaven or earth.' And this joy spreads through heaven itself; for Christ cannot be glad and heaven not throb in sympathy. What joy could be greater than that when Christ shall see of the travail of His soul, and be satisfied?

The Pharisees, to whom our Lord was speaking, could not fail to see that they were meant by the ninety and nine sheep left in the wilderness, whilst the lost sheep was taken home. In the former parable they were told they should not taste of the supper, whilst the publicans and sinners, even the Gentiles, were to sit down to it. Then they were represented as shutting themselves

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out of the feast by their frivolous excuses. Now they were described again as being outside, at a distance, not sharing in the joy. And why? Because they did not repent; they felt they had nothing to repent of. When Jesus calls them righteous men, He speaks of them as they would speak of themselves. They were just men, 'as touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless,' as St. Paul, who had been a Pharisee, declared himself to be (Phil. iii. 6, R.V.). What they needed was not a Saviour, but a Messiah. And Jesus came as a Physician, to heal those who were sick: 'the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost' (Luke xix. 10).

XXII

The Lost Piece of Silver

Luke xv. 8-10

' Either what woman, having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it? And when she hath found it, she calleth her friends and her neighbours together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost. Likewise, I say unto you, There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.'

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BUT there was another point of view from which to look at the loss of the publicans and sinners from the household of God. They were a portion of His chosen people; they also, like Zaccheus, were the sons of Abraham. They bore the same image, and were of the same value, as the Pharisees themselves: like coins struck in the same mint.

‘Either what woman,’ asks our Lord, ‘having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it?’ (Luke xv. 8).

The image is no longer a shepherd seeking his sheep, which has strayed away through its own folly and wilfulness, but a woman to whom ten pieces of silver have been entrusted, and who has lost one of them by her carelessness. The scribes and Pharisees considered themselves the spiritual guides and guardians of Israel, to whom God had entrusted His people. Who but they could be over the household of God? Yet they had lost one of the coins given into their keeping. They knew that it was lost; they ought, therefore, to have brought their candle, and swept the house,

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and sought diligently till they had found these lost souls amongst the publicans and sinners, who were, like themselves, the sons of Abraham. But the sweeping into the dark corners of the land, like the sweeping into neglected corners of a house, would bring into light many a shocking and revolting fact, from which they had shrunk in their selfish holiness. It was easier to stand aloof and murmur at those who were doing the work, crying, 'Stand not near me; I am holier than thou!' They were unfaithful to their trust. They had lost the coin, and were not willing to seek after it.

But Christ was even then founding a Church on earth which would take charge of the ten pieces of silver, belonging neither to the Gentiles nor to the Jews, but to our Lord Himself. The woman in the parable represents the Church of Christ, as the shepherd in the former one represents Christ. That the ten pieces of silver are not her own is shown in her words to her neighbours: 'I have found *the* piece which I had lost.' Not *my* piece. She, too, had lost it, and the blame was hers; whereas the shepherd had not neglected his sheep, it had strayed away from the fold, and 'was lost' by its own fault. The coin was of little value—a penny; that is, about a man's wages for one day's work—but it had been entrusted to her care; it might be of more worth in its owner's eyes than in hers. She ought to have taken more care of it, and she would be

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ashamed to return nine pieces of silver when the owner came to ask for ten.

Has not the Church lost many a coin stamped with the image of God and entrusted by God to her care? And now, through many agencies at home and abroad, is she not at last carrying her candle and sweeping into the darkest corners of the world, seeking diligently for the lost pieces of silver, worth as much as those other coins of which she has been more careful?

The woman called her friends and neighbours together to rejoice with her when she had found the piece she had lost. 'Likewise,' adds our Lord, 'I say unto you there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth' (Luke xv. 10). The very circumstance which made the scribes and Pharisees murmur was the cause of joy in heaven, also among those angels or messengers of God who are sent down to us as ministering spirits. There was joy in that great cloud of witnesses who compass us about whilst we run the race that is set before us, they themselves having run the same race beforehand. The joy of the Church of Christ is felt by both the Church militant and the Church triumphant.

The rebuke to the scribes and Pharisees in this second parable seems to be of their negligence in losing those classes of the people whom they called publicans and sinners, and of their indifference towards reclaiming them. If they had been truly

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alive to the responsibilities of their position as the spiritual guides and guardians of the nation, these classes could not have fallen into such depths of sin and degradation. They might have reformed them if they had made the effort in earnest. The woman would never have found the lost piece of silver if she had sat still in idle grief, or if she had shrunk from the dust and dirt the diligent sweeping would stir up. But they had chosen to stand aloof, so fearful of being themselves polluted that they would suffer no such public and manifest sinners to come near to them. Their self-righteousness had developed into selfish holiness.

XXIII

The Prodigal Son

Luke xv. 11-32

'And he said, A certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all^a together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough, and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise, and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against Heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against Heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry. Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and entreated him. And he, answering, said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee; neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment; and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. 'And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.'

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IN the Parable of the Lost Sheep our Lord had compared the loss of the publicans and sinners from among God's people with the loss of one out of a hundred. In that of the Lost Coin it was the loss of one out of ten. He was now about to state their worth at a far higher rate. The Pharisees and the publicans were compared with two sons: an elder and a younger brother, born in the same house, the children of the same father.

It was the younger son who grew weary of his home, and said to his father, 'Give me the portion of goods that falleth to me.' He had no legal claim to a share in the goods during his father's lifetime, but his request was granted, because it would have been useless to keep him at home against his will. In this the elder son had no responsibility and no blame. Though his father divided his living between them, he did not claim his portion. In such a manner, by their own free will, had the publicans and sinners left the house of God, choosing freedom and pleasures and riches, that portion which seems to men of the world the chief good.

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For a few days the younger son lingered about home, as if hardly able to quit his father hastily, after so great a proof of his love. But his father's house was a place of restraint. Like the rich fool in the parable, he felt that he had 'much goods laid up for many years,' and he wished to 'eat, drink, and be merry.' He gathered, therefore, all his goods together, and took his journey into a far country. He must get far enough from his father and brother to feel quite free. If he could get to such a distance that they could not follow him, there would be the place of real liberty and enjoyment for him.

This was a true picture of the publicans. As Jews they had been carefully instructed during their childhood in the law of God, and the young cannot fling aside all restraint at once. For a while they would lingeringly and reluctantly obey the law. But with many of them the actual time on which they set out on their disastrous career would be when they entered the despised and degraded office of a tax-gatherer, then the basest of all occupations. By this step they separated themselves from the companionship of all decent people; and after it their downward course was swift and far. Their wealth might increase, as that of Zaccheus did; and having shaken off the yoke of the law, there were many gratifications hitherto forbidden to them in which they could indulge. They might enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season.

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The younger son enjoyed these pleasures to the full whilst he wasted his substance in riotous living: that portion of goods his father had given to him. He succeeded in having his desire, eating and drinking and making merry; his soul was not required of him the same night. He had all the enjoyment he promised himself out of his freedom and riches. He denied himself nothing. Surely this was better than being a younger son in his father's house, with a narrow-minded and strict elder brother always on the watch to catch him in some fault. For there had been at home not only the check of his father's presence, but the thralldom of an elder brother's stiff authority. He was well away from him.

'When he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that country, and he began to be in want' (Luke xv. 14, R.V.). The season of pleasure in sin, always a short-lived season, was over. Riches are soon squandered in riotous living. Henceforth, if he remained in sin, he would partake only of its pains and penalties. It was a mighty famine that had come upon the land; not a mere scarcity, or a dearth of luxuries, but a famine of the real necessities of life, from which there was no escape. 'And he began to be in want.'

He might have returned at once to his father's house; but he could not believe himself unable to provide for his own necessities, and he was not yet ready to put his neck again under that yoke.

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which had so galled him. He went, therefore, and joined himself to a citizen of that country, in which he was still an alien and a stranger. He did not, and could not, belong to it, for his true home was in his father's house. He could not, by any steps he might take, alter the fact that he was his father's son; that tie must remain for ever unbroken, though he might go down to the deepest degradation.

He had degraded himself in all that constitutes true manhood; he was now to suffer the extremest form of outward degradation that a Jew could undergo. His new master sent him into the fields to feed swine—the most unclean of all unclean animals. Now, at last, he has fallen into the uttermost misery; but no! he would fain have been filled with the husks that the swine did eat, and no man gave unto him. No man could give to him; the misery that had come upon him could not be set right by devouring any quantity of the husks on which the swine could feed.

A few more touches are added here to the picture our Lord had given of the state of the publicans. They had fallen into extreme wretchedness. Having chosen the basest of all livelihoods, they had cut themselves off from fellowship with their own people, who regarded them as accursed traitors to their country. They were not even permitted to put alms of their ill-gotten gains into the boxes in the synagogues; and if it had been possible, their fellow-worshippers

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would have cast them out of their synagogues and excommunicated them. They were hated alike by the Pharisees and the people. No man gave unto them either love or pity. They were doomed to feed on the dregs and refuse of the sins which had once been a pleasure to them. They had been—they even were the sons of Abraham ; but they were as degraded as if their lives were spent in feeding swine.

At last, in his utter misery, the poor prodigal came to himself and recollected his father and his father's house. He who had been feeding swine and filling himself with the husks they ate, was no more worthy to be called a son ; but he might still dwell under his father's roof as his hired servant, with bread enough and to spare. It was bread only, the cheapest necessary of life, he dare ask for. Those servants did their daily work and had their wages for it ; whilst he, a son of their master, was perishing with hunger. He could still call the master of the household father, and his father would not refuse him a servant's place and food, if he went home confessing his sins and unworthiness. It was better to be the least in his father's house than to perish among the swine. He arose, therefore, and came to his father. Even the dread of his elder brother and the taunts he must expect from him did not deter him from that sad yet hopeful journey homewards. He had gone away rich and careless and wilful ; he came back poor and miserable and

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contrite, a beggar, with all his substance wasted in riotous living. He had strayed from his father's house into a far country, and every step of the road he had to retrace barefoot.

Yet his father was more willing to welcome him home than he had been to travel thitherward. He had kept himself informed of his son's reckless conduct, and knew how unworthy he had grown. 'But while he was yet afar off, his father saw him, and was moved with compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him' (Luke xv. 20, R.V.). The son began to pour out his confession, and the father interrupted him joyfully, bidding his servants to bring out quickly the best robe for his ragged prodigal, and to put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. They were also to prepare a feast to celebrate his son's return. 'For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found,' said the rejoicing father (Luke xv. 24).

So had Christ acted towards the publicans and sinners who had drawn near unto Him. He had seen them in their unhappiness and degradation whilst they were yet afar off, hardly daring to believe the gracious words He spoke were meant to encourage them; and He was moved with compassion towards them, and ran to meet them and welcome them back to the service of the God they had forsaken. The joy He and they felt when the gospel was preached to them, was fitly celebrated by His custom of not only receiving

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them to listen to Him as a teacher, but by His eating with them as a friend. The feast that Matthew made when our Lord called him to leave all his earthly goods and to follow Him, was a true festival. There was no insincerity in the joy of the publicans and sinners; it was real, as real as the joy which is in heaven when one sinner repents. They had long been weary of their degradation and of their exile from their Father's house; and the welcome Christ gave them filled their hearts with wonder and gladness.

'Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called to him one of the servants, and inquired what these things might be. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. But he was angry, and would not go in' (Luke xv. 25-27, R.V.).

His anger arose partly because he was away in the field when his brother arrived. If he had seen him return,—ragged, famine-stricken, and miserable,—if he had heard him stammer his sad confession of sin and unworthiness, and had not then been moved with compassion, there could have been no excuse for his churlish conduct. But he knew nothing of his brother's return, and came suddenly upon the signs of feasting and the sounds of merry-making; and they appeared to him to be only the display of a

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father's weakness for a dissolute and shameless son. He would not share in such weakness.

There was, too, a natural and almost pardonable jealousy in his heart as he witnessed what seemed to be partiality in his father. 'His father came out, and entreated him. But he answered and said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, and I never transgressed a commandment of thine: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: but when this thy son came, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou killedst for him the fatted calf' (Luke xv. 28-30, R.V.). It seems very hard to him. He was looking at his own conduct in the brightest light, and at his brother's in the darkest. The younger son had 'wasted his substance in riotous living'; his elder brother says, 'He hath devoured thy living with harlots.' It was the exaggeration of jealousy and self-esteem. For such a son the fatted calf had been killed; whilst he who had never transgressed a single commandment had not had so much as a kid given to him, that he might make merry with his friends. Surely there was good reason for murmuring at this; he was right to be angry.

His father rebuked him with as much tenderness and compassion as that with which he had welcomed back his prodigal son. He even condescended to remind him of his pre-eminence over his brother. 'Son,' he said, '*thou* art ever with me, and all that is mine is thine. But it

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was meet to make merry and be glad : for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again ; and was lost, and is found ' (Luke xv. 31, 32, R.V.).

There the parable closed abruptly. It was still open to the elder brother to yield to his father's entreaties and go into the feast and welcome his repentant brother. Their father's goods were all his own ; and the spendthrift could be only a penniless dependent upon his bounty. Moreover, the feast must end ; the music must cease, and the dancing come to a stop. To-morrow work and duty begin again. Who, then, would find it easiest to keep his father's commandments, the son who had never transgressed them, or the son who had wasted his substance and his strength in riotous living ? The latter must find his work hard and heavy and dull for a long season ; the joy of the feast would fade away, and old habits would hamper him along the path of duty. The memory of his sinful days would be grievous to him, notwithstanding his father's forgiveness ; and he had lost for ever the possibility of hearing his father say, ' Son, thou art ever with me.'

Our Lord would not hold up the publicans as being the true type of the sons of God. Rather the Pharisees were that, in the true and primary meaning of their name, the 'separated' ones. Not all the Pharisees² were self-righteous hypocrites ; there were among them conscientious and godly men. St. Paul was a Pharisee, so was

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Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathæa. Probably the apostle Simon Zelotes was one. As we cannot suppose all the publicans and sinners in the land came to Christ, so we cannot suppose that all the Pharisees were His enemies. Nay, the Pharisee, in his idea and plan of life, as being separate from sinners, was the elder brother in the household of God, the son who kept the commandments, and dwelt ever with his father. He was the righteous man, and it was right and meet for him to welcome back the publican when he returned penitent to the temple of God, crying, 'God be merciful to me, a sinner!' He, too, ought to go into the feast and rejoice over him who had been dead, and was alive again; who had been lost, and was found. If he could not do this, there would be no joy, even in heaven, for him. God is love; and where love is not, God is not.

But what does the parable say to us? Many things; but one lesson in particular. In a Christian country like our own, as in the Jewish country of Palestine, we are, as it were, born in the house of God, amidst the influences flowing from the knowledge of Him and the worship of Him. We are therefore in the position of one or other of these brothers. Most of us turn aside to our own way, and wander far off from our first consciousness of God, seeking to satisfy our souls with the empty husks that the world can give. We waste our lives, our time and talents, in foolish

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and sinful pleasures, or in the cruel service of riches. But there will come to every soul thus self-exiled from God, earlier or later, a period of mighty famine. It is true that such a soul may fill itself, though it can never satisfy itself, with the husks that the swine do eat. We may so wallow in worldly enjoyments and sordid riches, that instead of remembering our Father's house, and longing to dwell there again, even as a hired servant, we may loiter in the land of famine until we no longer hunger for the bread that is in our Father's house. Blessed is the soul that comes to itself in the hour of mighty famine !

Of a few among us it might be said that they never leave the Father's house; they never wander far from God. As a child may sometimes be self-willed, with no desire to leave his home, so may sin assail the chosen few and soil a little their white robes, but it never gains sway over them; they may stumble, but they do not fall. Like the rich young ruler whom Jesus loved, they keep the commandments from their youth up.

But let souls like these beware of the sin of the elder brother. There must be joy, and not murmuring, when repentant sinners are welcomed back to the Father's house with rapture, and for a brief season seem to be pre-eminent there. The love of God for His obedient children differs from His love over His lost ones, when they are found again: These can never cancel those long years of rebellion and of sin, though they are pardoned

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and brought home again. Which of us would not rather hear the Father say, 'Son, thou art ever with Me; and all Mine is thine,' than those other words, 'This, My son, was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found'?

XXIV

The Two Sons

Matt. xxi. 28-32

' But what think ye? A certain man had two sons ; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to-day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not : but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir : and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not : but the publicans and the harlots believed him : and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.'

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THIS parable is the first of three which our Lord addressed to the chief priests and elders when they came to Him in the Temple, asking by what authority He had overthrown the tables of the money-changers and cast out those who sold doves, and had healed the blind and the lame in the Temple itself. He replied by asking them a question which they dared not answer: 'The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven or from men?' Of all the people in the land, the chief priests and elders ought to have been able to answer this question; but they said, 'We do not know.' Our Lord seems to have lost all hope of touching the consciences and hearts of these men by general appeals. He must make His reproofs and denunciations of their sins more personal and direct. The mirror must be held up to them in open daylight.

'What think ye?' He said. 'A man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to-day in the vineyard. And he answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented himself, and went. And he came to the second,

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and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. Whether of the twain did the will of his father?' (Matt. xxi. 28-31, R.V.).

The first son, who roughly, carelessly, and boldly refused to work in his father's vineyard—which, being his father's, was also in some sense his own—represents the open and flagrant sinners, such as the publicans and harlots, who by their bold sins proclaim themselves rebels against the law of God. The second son, who softly answers, 'I go, sir,' is the type of the scribes and Pharisees, and of all those who, by the scrupulous observance of all the outer forms of religion and morality, appear to be obeying this law: who honour God with their lips, whilst their heart is far from Him.

Now when John the Baptist came in a way of righteousness, which was not the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, insisting on repentance as the first step towards entering the kingdom of God, they did not believe that he was sent to them. God called to them, 'Son, go work to-day in the vineyard,' and each self-righteous soul answered, 'I go, Lord.' But the way into the vineyard led through the gate of repentance, and they would not enter thereat.

But the publicans and the harlots, who by their lives had said 'I will not' to all God's laws, at the preaching of John the Baptist did repent themselves, going in multitudes to ask, 'Teacher,

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what must we do? How can we work in the vineyard?' And he had said, 'Bring forth fruits worthy of your repentance.' It is the doing of the will of God, not the saying 'Thy will be done!' which makes us true labourers in His vineyard.

Yet though the publicans and the harlots had gone into the kingdom of God, they had but gone in before the scribes and Pharisees, if these were willing, even now, to enter in. The gate of repentance stands open always, and whosoever will may pass through it and find himself at once in the kingdom of heaven.

In our Lord's eye the sin of sins is hypocrisy; for it is the sin that separates the soul most utterly from God. For other sins wear the appearance of evil; but this one walks the earth in the garb of holiness. No lie is so terrible as that when a man says, 'I serve God,' and serves Him not.

XXV

The Wicked Husbandmen

Matt. xxi. 33-44 ; Mark xii. 1-12 ; Luke xx. 9-18

'Hear another parable : There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a wine-press in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country : And when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it. And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another. Again, he sent other servants more than the first : and they did unto them likewise. But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son. But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir ; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance. And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him. When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen ? They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons. Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner : this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes ? Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken : but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.'—MATT. xxi. 33-44.

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THE Parable of the Two Sons is recorded only by Matthew; this of the Wicked Husbandmen appears in the three Gospels. Probably by the time He ended the first short parable the people had gathered about Him, as well as the chief priests and elders, who had met Him as He entered the Temple with the question, 'By what authority doest Thou these things?' Probably, also, His questioners were turning away in suppressed rage at His outspoken reproof of themselves, the rulers and chief men of the nation, when the Lord arrested them by the words, 'Hear another parable.' It is not now the sin of sins, hypocrisy, which Jesus Christ denounces in it, but two sins common to the priesthood of all nations, and of all times—persecution of others, and the more subtle sin of appropriating to themselves the fruits which belong to God.

A vineyard was one of the most valuable of possessions; but its value depended almost wholly on the diligence and watchfulness of the men at work in it. The vine may be very good, and the planter may take every care in planting it, but if

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it is left to itself, or if it be too much or too little pruned, the grapes will be poor or bad.

The kingdom of God upon earth is like a vineyard; and the idea of this kingdom was first entrusted to the Jewish nation. Every Jew listening to our Lord was familiar with the emblem of the vineyard. When He said, 'There was a certain householder which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a wine-press in it, and built a tower' (Matt. xxi. 33), it must have recalled to them the parable of Isaiah, 'My well-beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: and he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a wine-press therein: and he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes' (Isa. v. 1, 2). Was Jesus of Nazareth going to repeat the old story?

The householder let his vineyard out to husbandmen, and went into a far country for a long while. God, loving freedom so greatly that He leaves us free even to choose evil, will not force nations or individuals into obedience to the laws of His kingdom. But He looks for obedience, and sends His messengers to receive the fruits that are due unto Him. To the Jews He sent prophets time after time; for in words recorded again and again by Jeremiah, God says, 'I sent unto you all My servants the prophets, daily rising up early and sending them' (Jer. vii. 25). To the Jewish nation,

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but more especially to the priests and elders of the people, had these messengers come ; and what had they done with God's servants, who had demanded the fruits due to their Lord ?

The consciences of all His hearers must have been smitten as Jesus said, ' And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another ' (Matt. xxi. 35). The nation had permitted Jezebel to slay the prophets of the Lord, and cause Elijah to flee for his life. Ahab sent Micaiah to be fed with waters and bread of affliction ; Jeremiah was thrust into a loathsome dungeon to perish of hunger, and was at last stoned to death, so their tradition ran, by the exiles in Egypt. Isaiah was sawn asunder by Manasseh. Even their last prophet, John the Baptist, whom they had seen with their own eyes, and heard with their own ears, they had suffered to perish in prison for his faithful denunciation of vice. But there was still one other messenger whom God could send ; whom, indeed, He had already sent. ' Last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son. But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir ; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance ' (Matt. xxi. 37, 38).

It was at this point of the parable that the Jewish nation was then standing, with its priests and elders, its scribes and Pharisees, its friends and foes of Christ. They knew He called Himself the

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Son of Man, and did not refuse to be called the Son of God. He spoke of the Temple as His Father's house, and cast out of it those who were making it a den of thieves. He proclaimed the kingdom of God as being now begun upon earth, and open to all who would enter into it. If the Jewish nation had but revered the Son, what would the state of the world have been now?

We cannot suppose that the foes of Jesus Christ said openly, or even to themselves: 'This is the Messiah; let us slay Him.' No persecutor ever said, 'This man is truly the servant of God; and I will kill him.' The spirit of persecution shuts the eyes to the light, and stifles the faint suggestions of conscience. The council of chief priests and Pharisees a few weeks before had heard and approved of Caiaphas the high priest when he said, 'Ye know nothing at all, nor do ye take account that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not' (John xi. 49, 50, R.V.). They were afraid that the Romans would come and take away their place. The inheritance would be lost. The vineyard would cease to be their own, and the fruits of it, which had belonged to them exclusively, would be scattered over the world. If the hated heathen were admitted into the kingdom of God, what place would His favourite nation have? They must slay this man.

And now the parable which had dealt with the past and present, presented to our Lord's hearers

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a prophecy of the future. He told them what He clearly foresaw. These men thronging about Him were now discussing His fate. In a few days the words He was speaking would be verified: 'They cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him.' Could He make them see their own sin in the sin of these rebellious and defiant husbandmen? But a long course of hypocrisy had blinded their eyes, and hardened their hearts, and hatred had kindled the fierce fire of persecution in their spirits.

'When therefore the lord of the vineyard shall come, what will he do unto those husbandmen?' asked Jesus (Matt. xxi. 40, R.V.).

'He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons' (Matt. xxi. 41), was the answer; whether uttered by the Pharisees, as if unconscious of His drift, or by the common people, we do not know. Then Jesus continued, in words so plain and simple that not one among His hearers could misunderstand, 'Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof' (Matt. xxi. 43). And all the people, when they heard it, cried, 'God forbid!'

But in the Gospel according to St. Luke there are added the following significant words: 'And the chief priests and the scribes *the same hour* sought to lay hands on Him; and they feared the people: for they perceived that He had spoken

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this parable against them. And they watched Him, and sent forth spies, which should feign themselves just men, that they might take hold of His words, that so they might deliver Him to the power and authority of the governor.' This is the story of persecution through all the ages.

XXVI

The Marriage of the King's Son

Matt. xxii. 1-14

' And Jesus answered and spake unto them again by parables, and said, The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son, And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come. Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage. But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise: And the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them. But when the king heard thereof, he was wroth: and he sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city. Then saith he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy. Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage. So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all, as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests.

' And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding-garment: And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither, not having a wedding-garment? And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen.'

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THERE is so general a similarity between this parable and that of the Great Supper that some commentators and critics count them as one and the same. But there are more differences than resemblances; and each is specially suited to the circumstances under which it was spoken. When our Lord uttered the Parable of the Great Supper, He was sitting at a Sabbath feast, Himself the invited and apparently honoured guest of one of the chief Pharisees in the land of Perea. Now He was in the Temple at Jerusalem, encircled by a crowd of open antagonists, who were roused to the bitterest anger by the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen. But they were kept in check by a multitude of fickle friends: the multitude which the day before had welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem with shouts of 'Hosanna: Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord: Blessed be the kingdom of our father David, that cometh in the name of the Lord: Hosanna in the highest' (Mark xi. 9, 10). For the present He was safe from His enemies; and He availed Himself of the temporary security.

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Not only were the circumstances dissimilar, the scope of the parables is different. In the Great Supper God is represented under the likeness of a man preparing a banquet for his friends, who neglect and despise his hospitality. Here He is described as a king making a marriage feast for his son ; and the guests bidden are his subjects, whose refusal to obey his invitation is an act of open rebellion. So the penalties differ. In the former parable the only and natural requital is being shut out from the house, and not being allowed to taste of the supper they had scorned. In the later parable the rebels, who kill the servants sent to call them, are destroyed by the king's armies as murderers, and their city is burned.

This is the last parable spoken in public by our Lord, and its tone of awful severity is exceedingly remarkable. He, the King's Son, was come to open the kingdom of heaven upon earth, and He found the religious classes of the nation, the priests and elders, the scribes and Pharisees, shutting up the kingdom against men ; they would neither go in themselves, nor suffer them that were entering to go in. The perfect patience and long-suffering of our Lord stand aloof for a moment, that He may pour out the righteous indignation and wrath of His sorrowful spirit. He gave utterance to the most severe and terrible of His parables ; and shortly afterwards followed it by His reiterated denunciation,

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‘Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!’
(Matt. xxiii. 13).

‘The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son, and sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come’ (Matt. xxii. 2, 3). In only one other parable—that of the Unmerciful Servant—is God likened unto a king; and in no other does our Lord liken Himself unto a king’s son. But there is a special fitness for it here: yesterday the people hailed Him as the Son of David; and He is on the eve of His great humiliation on the Cross. The kingdom of heaven was not coming among the Jews as an unexpected and unannounced event. They had been long since bidden to it, and it had been foreshadowed and foretold through many generations. They should have been ready for it, even if there had been no special messengers to remind them. But the messengers had been sent to call them to the marriage feast, and they would not come.

The feast was an essential part of the marriage among Eastern nations, as our public celebration of it used to be. The marriage was not completed without the feast. It would have been an unpardonable insult to neglect attending the marriage feast of a private person; but to refuse to go to the marriage of their king’s son was an act of open rebellion, for which no excuse

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could be offered. For this cause, therefore, the guests made no excuse—they simply ‘would not come.’

So impossible and incredible seemed this refusal that ‘the king sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage’ (Matt. xxii. 4). The king gives them a second opportunity, supposing they may not have understood that all the preparations were finished, and only the guests were wanting. ‘But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise’ (Matt. xxii. 5). At first our Lord’s ministry had been received with deaf ears, and dull understanding, and general carelessness and neglect; but He had forced them to hear and understand, and the neglect had passed on into contempt. The bulk of the people made light of His teaching; so light that in a day or two the fickle crowds would not only consent to His death, but would cry out, ‘Crucify Him! Crucify Him! We have no king but Cæsar!’ (John xix. 15). And they would go their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise, forgetful of Him and His claims.

‘And the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them’ (Matt. xxii. 6). The remnant were not merely contemptuous, but they were fierce and active rebels,

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who were willing further to show their enmity by slaying the messengers sent to remind them of their duties as subjects. The scribes and Pharisees had not yet reached the point of murder, of judicial murder, but they were plotting it. Was it still possible for them to be warned, and turned aside from their monstrous crime? No hope now remained in the heart of Christ that any words of His would call them to repentance. The scope of the parable did not allow of any mention of the king's son being sent to the rebels; but the servants of God had suffered death, and would suffer it again and again, at the hands of the rebels against God's law. It needs must be that Christ should reluctantly pronounce their doom.

The sentence was a terrible one, and the prophecy it contained was terribly fulfilled. Their city, Jerusalem with its sacred Temple, the only spot on earth where they could offer sacrifices to God, was to be burned, and they themselves destroyed, by the armies of their foes. This came to pass thirty-seven years afterwards, whilst many were still living who saw the dawn of the day on which our Lord was crucified; and many more were living who had consented to the death of His followers.

The story of the parable then returns to the marriage of the king's son, which must needs have guests to celebrate it. 'The king saith to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they that

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were bidden were not worthy. Go ye therefore unto the partings of the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage feast' (Matt. xxii. 8, 9, R.V.).

There is no mention of compulsion here, as in the former parable; because, as king's servants, if they used any means save that of invitation, they must use absolute force, not the more friendly constraint which one servant of a private personage could assert. The guests were to be bidden, as the former guests had been, only they must come in at once; there was no time for preliminary invitations. And whosoever was found was to be bidden—there was to be no question of fitness or of citizenship. 'So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all, as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests' (Matt. xxii. 10). Not only were the common people among the Jews, the publicans and sinners, to be made welcome to the kingdom of God; but the heathen of every nation, all sorts and conditions of men, wherever man is found, both good and bad—those nations or persons living up to a certain moral standard, and those so plunged in ignorance and degradation as to have no moral laws. Both good and bad were to enter into that kingdom which the Jews had held to be exclusively their own. The feast must be furnished with guests.

Here the former parable closes; for there the

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feast was no more than a supper hospitably given to guests who owed only friendliness to their host. But this is a royal banquet, and our Lord had one more lesson to teach, not to the Pharisees alone, but to all who were bidden to enter the kingdom of God.

On such magnificent occasions as the marriage of a king's son it was customary to give a suitable robe to each guest, more or less resembling that of the bridegroom; and no insult was deeper than to refuse or neglect to wear such a gift. To disdain the royal robe was an affront to be punished by banishment, and sometimes death.

'But when the king came in to behold the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding-garment' (Matt. xxii. 11, R.V.). Such a robe must have been provided for him, as for the others, who also had been gathered in from the highways, with no opportunity for supplying themselves with suitable apparel. For we cannot of ourselves cast off our old habits of sin and folly, and put on the righteousness which alone can fit us to stand in the presence of God. This robe of righteousness must be the gift of Christ, and must resemble His own, as the wedding-garment of the guest resembled that of the bridegroom. It would seem, too, that the king's servants had either not noticed or not ventured to interfere with the guest who was not wearing the royal robe. He had wilfully rejected it, possibly as proud of his own, or as contemptuous

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of his fellow-guests, with whom he did not wish to be confounded. In this case possibly the servants had regarded him as some superior personage, with whom they must not meddle. Or his ordinary garb so closely resembled the wedding-garment that he slipped in among the crowd of guests, and was distinguishable from them only by the keen, all-seeing eye of the king himself. He may typify a self-righteous man who feels that he has no need of any robe to cover his soiled garments, as the rest did; or he may be a hypocrite, a wolf in sheep's clothing, known to no one save the True Shepherd of the sheep.

‘Friend, how camest thou in hither, not having on a wedding garment?’ asked the king. And ‘he was speechless’ (Matt. xxii. 12). He had not cared to put on the bridegroom’s gift, and he had gone into the feast knowing himself unlike all the other guests. There was no possible plea to be urged; and to that terrible, yet gentle, question he could not answer a word.

But he could not stay there, a disturber and troubler of the marriage. Here, in the king’s presence, was light and joy and feasting, of which he was not fit to partake. His rightful place was without, in the outer darkness, where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth among the many who had been called to the wedding, but who had proved themselves unworthy. That was his own place; not here, among the chosen

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ones, who celebrated the marriage of their king's son.

One doom, therefore, befalls them all: the self-righteous man, who despises the claims of Christ; the hypocrite, who feigns to be His disciple; the rich man, too full of pleasure, and the merchant, too full of business, to have time to consider the kingdom of God. All of them are cast into the darkness outside the kingdom, where there is sorrow and wrath and terror. Many are called, though through their own folly and sin they are cast out from the marriage feast with which the kingdom is ushered in.

There is no lawful feeling which our Lord did not feel in its utmost fulness. If our hearts are stirred to their depths by a great crime, how much more must His spirit have been shaken and overwhelmed by contact with sin! Around Him stood men in the garb of priests, and Pharisees who had made broad their phylacteries and enlarged the borders of their garments: they were come from their sacrifices and public prayers, and they held themselves as being holier than the people; yet murder was in their hearts, and they were even then, as they surrounded Him, plotting how they should take Him and slay Him; only they feared the people, whom they also despised. There was no sin so heinous in the eyes of Christ as the sin of hypocrisy; and turning to these foes of His, He denounces this crowning sin, uttering the awful words: 'Ye serpents, ye generation of

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vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell? ' (Matt. xxiii. 33).

There was also one, but only one, among His twelve chosen friends, who wore the same garb of discipleship, and listened to the same teaching, and saw the same marvellous works as the rest, but who was plotting treachery in his heart, and was about to betray his Master with a kiss. A hypocrite walked side by side with Him, and ate at the same table and drank of the same cup. Of him Jesus said, 'Woe unto that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! it were better for that man if he had not been born' (Matt. xxvi. 24). Most terrible are these sentences from the lips which said, 'Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls' (Matt xi. 28, 29).

This was the last parable spoken by our Lord in public. Two more are recorded as having been privately addressed to His disciples later on in the same day, as He sat with them on the Mount of Olives, looking across to the beautiful Temple He was never more to enter. His Father's house was become a den of thieves and murderers. In two days afterwards was the feast of the Passover, and the Son of Man was already betrayed to be crucified.

XXVII

The Ten Virgins

Matt. xxv. 1-13

' Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were wise, and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them : But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh ; go ye out to meet him. Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil ; for our lamps are gone out. But the wise answered, saying, Not so ; lest there be not enough for us and you : but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves. And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came ; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage ; and the door was shut. Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.'

The Ten Virgins

OUR Lord had been spending a long day in Jerusalem. He had cast out all them that sold and bought in the Temple, and overthrown the tables of the money-changers. To the chief priests and elders He had spoken the Parables of the Two Sons (Matt. xxi. 28-32) and of the Wicked Husbandmen (xxi. 33-41); and again, the Marriage of the King's Son (xxii. 2-14). The Pharisees and Sadducees had alike tried to entangle Him in His talk; and a lawyer, tempting Him, had asked Him which is the great commandment in the law? After these things, Jesus denounced both scribes and Pharisees, calling them hypocrites, and showing forth their hypocrisy with the utmost severity.

It was now evening, and our Lord, worn out and weary with the long conflict, departed from the Temple, which He was never more to enter, and sat down with His disciples on the Mount of Olives. Here He could see the Holy City, so dear to every Jewish heart, the destruction of which prompted the last words He had spoken in the Temple. The disciples asked Him, with natural curiosity, when these things should be;

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and also what would be the sign of His coming, and of the end of the world. At the close of His answer to these questions He commanded them, 'Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of Man cometh' (Matt. xxv. 13); and to impress this point upon their memories, He spoke to them the Parable of the Ten Virgins. The imagery of the last parable spoken in the Temple recurred to His mind; but now He addresses the friends of the bride and bridegroom, not the contemptuous and rebellious citizens. Even these friends might be shut out from the feast with which the kingdom of heaven is to be ushered in.

The number—ten—is the sign of completeness; and thus includes all our Lord's disciples, from His mother down to the least and last of His followers. The ten virgins were the friends of the bride; and for friendship's sake—not commanded or in any way compelled—they took their lamps and went forth to meet the bridegroom. In some convenient spot they were to meet the bridal procession, to give the bridegroom and bride a joyous greeting, and to go in with them to the marriage feast. Each of them carried her own lamp.

Now five were foolish, and five were wise. The Revised Version places the foolish virgins first, because the lesson of the parable proceeds chiefly from them. 'They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them; but the

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wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.' Alas! one-half of the Lord's followers are reckoned as foolish; reminding us of His sorrowing question: 'When the Son of Man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?' In His last public parable, the Marriage of the King's Son (Matt. xxii. 2-13), He had spoken of only one guest who had not accepted the wedding-garment; yet here, of His friends, one-half might fail Him, through their folly.

The foolish virgins were sure the bridegroom would come quickly: did they not hear already the joyful songs and laughter of those that were in attendance on him, and see the glitter of lights held on high in the distance? Their lamps would be at the brightest as the procession passed by. They resemble those souls who hear the word, and straightway with joy receive it; or those who likewise hear the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and they become unfruitful. Five of the virgins were but foolish friends, unlikely to prove faithful and ready when the supreme moment came.

But the wise virgins, not content with having their lamps lighted and burning, had taken care to have oil in their vessels. They would run no risk of meeting the bridal procession with dim and expiring lights. Like those who, in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience, they

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were ready to wait long for the coming of the bridegroom.

All of them had oil; and as they went forth with their glittering lamps there was no apparent difference. Nay, the foolish virgins, being sure that the bridegroom was already near at hand, might seem the most joyous, and the most eager to greet him. They were neither foes nor hypocrites: only foolish friends.

‘While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept’ (Matt. xxv. 5). At this point of the parable our Lord gives His disciples a hint that His coming again in His glory, which they had set their hearts upon, would be long delayed. It was not to be wondered at, that, after the excitement and busy preparation of the day, all the virgins, during the long hours of waiting, should grow drowsy, and, first slumbering, should at last fall asleep. Only the third day after our Lord had uttered this parable, three of His dearest and wisest disciples fell asleep in His hour of agony; and He cried to them: ‘What! could ye not watch with Me one hour? Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing; but the flesh is weak’ (Matt. xxvi. 40, 41). There is no duty more difficult than to watch, merely to watch, for an event which is long delayed. How few of us live each day as if watching for, and hasting unto, the kingdom of heaven! The world is full of distractions.

The Ten Virgins

‘At midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom! Come ye forth to meet him’ (Matt. xxv. 6, R.V.). It was the cry of the forerunners as they ran by, to make sure that the gates of the bridegroom’s house should fly open to welcome the bridal procession. If the virgins had been watching, the first sound of the cry would have filled their hearts with exceeding great joy.

But they had to awake, and arise in haste. Their lamps might have gone out while they slept. They were indeed just going out, and needed to be trimmed at once. If the foolish virgins had remained awake, they would have seen their lamps flickering, and might have had opportunity, even in the last hour before midnight, to seek and buy, though with difficulty, the oil which they might have procured so easily in the daytime. Now their only hope is that their companions had enough and to spare. But the wise virgins were compelled to answer: ‘Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves’ (Matt. xxv. 9). They could not run the risk of meeting the bridegroom with dim⁷ and dying lights. There was still a hope that their companions might by chance buy more oil in time for the feast.

But what, then, is the^o oil, of which the wise virgins kept a reserved supply, each one in her own vessel, while the foolish ones rested

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content with that which was in their lamps only?

What was lacking in them?

It is this, that having received a measure of the grace of our Lord, and having tasted of the heavenly gift, and having been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, they did not go on in the heavenly life. It is not possible for the Spirit to dwell in a soul that indolently yields itself to other influences. The inward light is given to us, but it rests with ourselves whether or no we keep the lamp burning. God breathes into us the breath of life, but it is only by ourselves continuing to breathe that our souls can live.

There are some who, being born of spiritually-minded parents, possess an intellect of quicker insight into spiritual things, and a heart more attuned to love, and hope, and faith, than other souls. These seem to inherit, as it were, a natural grace. They enter into life with lamps already lit. Their feet are on the very threshold of the strait gate and narrow way leading to the kingdom of heaven. They are friends of the bride, though as yet strangers to the Bridegroom. Their natural graces may last through untroubled times, and show as fair as the graces of Christ's real followers; but they do not go on seeking after perfection.

Whether the coming of the bridegroom at midnight signifies that second and fuller advent of our Lord which in all ages some portion of His

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Church has watched for, or that certain coming of Christ to each soul at the moment of death, the lesson of this parable is alike to all: Be ready to arise and go out to meet Him. At that solemn call each spirit will see itself as it truly is, and will know if its lamp is gone out, or if it has the light of life burning within it. This light no soul can impart to another; each has to seek for it by personal prayer and watchfulness. 'None can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him' (Ps. xlix. 7). While the foolish virgins went to buy, the bridegroom came, and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut. It is not said that the foolish virgins were unable to buy the oil they needed; but the time of night made it very difficult. Coming back to the spot where they had left their companions, it may be with their lamps now burning, they found that the bridal procession had come and gone on without them. They knew the way it had gone, and followed mournfully along the now dark and deserted streets with neither music nor song, such as would have accompanied them if they had been found watching.

But the door was shut when at last they reached it. They could hear the sounds of joy within, 'the shout of them that triumph, the song of them that feast.' They cried: 'Lord, Lord, open to us.' But how should the bridegroom know them, who were only the friends of the

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bride? These friends of hers have already come in with the procession, having met it at the appointed spot. To their cry he answers: 'Verily I say unto you, I know you not' (Matt. xxv. 11, 12).

Our Lord does not say here the words He utters in the Sermon on the Mount to those who claimed to be His disciples: 'I never knew you: depart from Me, ye that work iniquity' (Matt. vii. 23). The foolish virgins had not worked iniquity. They had been so engrossed with outward things that their minds had been set upon them, instead of gaining some knowledge of the Bridegroom, and making themselves known of Him. They were content with entering the court of the temple, and had never gone on into the temple itself. They had been foolish and shallow, improvident and careless; but they were friends of the bride. Was there no hope for them?

To lose the joy of hearing our Lord say in the day of His coming, 'Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world' (Matt. xxv. 34), must be a loss passing the loss of worlds. To have been called to be among the first in the kingdom of heaven, and only to creep therein as one of the least, must be an eternal loss. To know that we might have been in the Father's house from the beginning, yet only to return to it, like the prodigal son, after long wanderings and sore degradation, is a sorrow that will, as it were,

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for ever make less bright the glory which may,
after all, shine upon the penitent soul.

‘ Watch therefore, for ye know not the day nor
the hour when the Son of Man cometh ’ (Matt.
xxv. 13).

XXVIII

The Talents

Matt. xxv. 14-30

'For the kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one: to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey. Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same, and made them other five talents. And likewise he that had received two, he also gained other two. But he that had received one went and digged in the earth, and hid his lord's money. After a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them. And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: behold, I have gained besides them five talents more. His Lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. He also that had received two talents came and said, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: behold, I have gained two other talents besides them. His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not straved: And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine. His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not straved: Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury. Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents. For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not, shall be taken away even that which he hath. And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

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THE lesson of the Ten Virgins was the personal responsibility — that is, the inward state—of our Lord's followers. That of the Talents teaches their active duties. To watch, to wait, and to work is the sum of both. Sometimes our duty lies in faithfully waiting, at other times in faithfully working, for our Lord.

The Parable of the Pounds is so similar to that of the Talents, that many commentators reckon them as two versions of the same parable. There are several differences worth noticing.

In the Talents a man is described as going from home, and calling his own bond-servants and giving his goods in charge to them, to each one according to his ability. Upon reckoning with them, one proved to be unfaithful to the trust reposed in him, and was cast out of his master's household into outer darkness. This parable was spoken to our Lord's immediate disciples, who were sitting with Him on the Mount of Olives, with the darkness of night close at hand.

The Parable of the Pounds, as recorded in St. Luke's Gospel, was spoken on our Lord's last journey from Jericho to Jerusalem : not to disciples

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merely, but to the mixed multitude of pilgrims and Pharisees who thronged about 'Him. Here it is the governor of a city, who is going to be made a king by his suzerain. Ten servants are called. This must mean—ten being the symbol of completeness—all the servants, or possibly the principal servants, who superintended the work of the others. The nobleman gave an equal sum, a small one, to them all. His citizens sent a rebellious message after him. He returned as king, with the power of life and death in his hands, and commanded that his enemies should be slain. The lesson of both parables is the same.

The householder, about to take a journey to another country, knew his servants so intimately that he could distribute his goods to each one according to his ability. He could distribute them according to his own pleasure and judgment; and having done so, he straightway took his journey. The servants were bond-servants: themselves and all that they had, or earned, belonged to their master. They could possess nothing of their own. The grace Christ was about to bestow upon His disciples could never, in any sense, be their own; nor could they bestow a portion of it on a fellow-servant.

The man travelling into another country is our Lord Himself, 'Knowing that He was come from God, and went to God'. (John xiii. 3). The Revised Version translates 'a far country' into

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'another country,' as if in sympathy with the sorrow of His disciples, who could not bear to think of Him as far away. Indeed, our Lord does not withdraw Himself, as into a far country, from any of His own.

The goods entrusted to the servants are spiritual gifts, those graces of God's Spirit which can only live and last when kept in active use. For love grows by loving, faith by believing; love, faith, hope, and every other spiritual good are not passive states of the mind. They are to be continually exercised to the glory of God and the welfare of man.

Though the servants had different sums committed to them, their duty was precisely the same—to do the best they could for their master. It was not more difficult for one than another; no excuse could be offered by any of them, such as that he had had too few or too many talents given to him. The sum had been allotted to them according to their ability.

The temptation to all slavish natures is to indolence or personal indulgence during their masters' absence. The servants who had received five talents and two talents, exactly doubled those sums by carefully and industriously trading with them. But he who had been entrusted with only one talent, being perhaps somewhat disappointed and jealous of his fellow-servants, and thinking he might have done something with five talents, or even with two, but nothing worth doing with one,

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'went and digged in the earth, and hid his lord's money' (Matt. xxv. 18).

Among the followers of our Lord then listening to Him there were representatives of all these classes. There were the men with five talents, such as John and Peter, and James, the Lord's brother; very soon Paul would be added to their number. Men they were whose names will be held in remembrance as long as the world shall endure. But the greater number of our Lord's disciples, then and now, were men with two talents, doing silent, unobtrusive work, and leaving little or no trace of their own lives; yet their labours are no less precious in the eyes of their Lord. They are like the leaven hidden in the meal, which in due time will leaven the whole mass.

There was one among the disciples to whom one talent had been given,—for we must believe that Judas himself had possessed some spiritual grace when our Lord called him to be His disciple, —but he had hidden his Lord's gift, and was already plotting how he could turn his knowledge of the Lord to his own profit.

'After a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them' (Matt. xxv. 19). The 'long time' was a hint to the disciples, like the words 'While the bridegroom tarried,' that His return would not be so immediate as they ardently hoped. They must work for Him as well as watch for His coming, neither growing

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weary nor relaxing from their labour because of His long absence. To most of us, after receiving the heavenly gifts, it is a long time before we are called to give an account of our stewardship. For it is the final reckoning here spoken of: that which we must render when there is no more work to do. No time was given to the foolish virgins to buy oil for their lamps; and no time was given to the slothful servant to begin to trade with his lord's money.

Two of the servants, equal in faithfulness, though differing in gifts, hastened joyfully and fearlessly to give in their accounts. They received the same reward from their lord, and heard the glad words: 'Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord' (Matt. xxv. 23). John, and James his brother, Peter, and Andrew his brother, James, the Lord's brother, and Philip, each received the same praise. They entered at once into the joy of the festival held in honour of their Lord's return; and when the feast was over, they were to be employed in more and higher service.

And this is what the servants of our Lord now are looking for—to meet Him, and see His face with joy when He shall call them to give an account of deeds done in this life; and after that rapture of immortal gladness, to go on serving Him in nobler ways. To be faithful here is the

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only preparation possible for higher service hereafter. Sitting down as an invited guest at his master's table made a slave a free man; he was no longer a bond-servant, but a friend. In that hour of unutterable and inconceivable joy all trace of servitude will pass away from faithful servants; and they will henceforth be called the brethren of Him who calls Himself our brother.

The unfaithful and slothful servant was called to an account, which he could not escape. He came, bringing in his hand the very talent his lord had given to him. His excuse was that he was afraid, and hid the money; but, it was safe, and he restored it to its owner—'Lo! there thou hast that is thine.' He knew his lord was a hard man, and would not be satisfied with the little he could do with so small a sum. It would neither enrich nor impoverish his lord.

He had done nothing. The foolish virgins had done nothing. In the solemn prophecy which follows this parable, those on the left hand of the judge are charged only with doing nothing. A servant who renders no service is altogether worthless.

Some souls there are who, through real timidity, hide their one talent. But even these, self-diffident as they are, may help the least of Christ's little ones, or smooth some little difficulty out of the way of His workers. In this way they put their one talent to usury. The desire to

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serve is the one thing needful. George Herbert writes—

‘As when th’ heart says (sighing to be approved),
O, could I love ! and stops ; God writeth, Loved.’

But the slothful servant had no such desire. He had persuaded himself that his lord was a hard master, and would require more of him than was just. He therefore grew afraid as well as indolent. A slothful soul is always shrinking from any effort. It is afraid to know more of God, lest the knowledge should urge him to some service it shrinks from ; and it is afraid to know more of the sins and miseries of the world, lest its quiet should be disturbed. ‘The slothful man says, There is a lion in the way : a lion is in the streets.’

The lord does not disown the character his servant gives to him. He answers : ‘Thou knewest I was a hard man.’ The faithful servants had quite a different estimate of him : to them he was a beloved master whom they rejoiced to serve. In a certain sense God is to each of us what we think He is. To the childlike soul He is the heavenly Father, the ever-present Friend ; nay, Love itself. To others He is the righteous and omnipotent King, but too far off to be approached save through intercessors and mediators. Others, again, look upon Him as the stern Judge, whose eye is fixed upon them to count up every sin. To the slothful soul He is a

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hard and austere Master; how could such a servant enter into the joy of his Lord?

Therefore he must go to his own place. He cannot sit down with his fellow-servants in the light and gladness of their Lord's house. He must be cast into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and wailing. There the foolish virgins stand knocking at the door, and crying, 'Lord, Lord! open unto us!' There is the servant who said in his heart, 'My lord delayeth his coming,' and began to smite his fellow-servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken. There also are the hypocrites, those children of the kingdom who are workers of iniquity. The outer darkness contains and conceals them all.

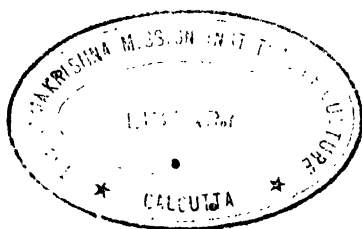
There is no mistake in life so fatal as to misunderstand the nature and character of God. It is true we are but as little children, who cannot comprehend the character of their parents save as they show it by their conduct to them. But even a very young child forms a true idea of his father and mother.

This is the last recorded parable uttered by our Lord during His life on earth. To His disciples He spoke no more in parables. Those that are given to us are of universal application, and belong as truly to us as to those whose ears heard our Lord's voice speaking to them. The last two are specially addressed to those who call themselves His friends and servants: to those

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who profess to be waiting for Him, and those who say they are, working for Him. The sin of the foolish virgins was self-confidence; that of the unprofitable servant was slothfulness. The divine life dies through indolence; and it slumbers and sleeps amid the absorbing cares and pleasures of this world.

Our Lord sums up all religion in the words: 'This is life eternal, that they might know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent' (John xvii. 3).



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